

ANNETTE K. LARSEN



HOOKED

TALES OF WINBERG
BOOK ONE



Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[Cloaked in Scarlet Preview](#)

[To My Readers](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Also By](#)

[About the Author](#)

HOOKED

Annette K. Larsen

Copyright © 2022 Annette K. Larsen and Hidden Falls Publishing

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9798474638638

ISBN-13:

Cover design by Karri Klawiter. Artbykarri.com

Edited by Jana Miller. the-writers-assistant.com

For all those who have been with me since the beginning.
This series is for you.

Prologue

Before

I knew no words would change my situation as I watched my uncle making final checks and preparations on the coach that would carry me away.

“Your life will be much better when you are the wife of Captain Huckley,” my mother said as she fussed with some hairs that had come loose from the knot at the back of my head. It seemed they wished to escape just as much as I did.

“But I don’t want to get married.” My voice was flat.

“We’ve waited as long as we could, Wendolyn,” Mother cajoled. “But your uncle is adamant. We are fortunate that he was willing to take us in in the first place, but to allow you to stay here even after a wealthy man has offered for you? You are lucky he has been so patient. You’ve had these years to grow up, to learn how to run a household.”

I inwardly scoffed at that. I had learned to run a household long before Captain Huckley took notice of me. I’d done it for years. We had been wealthy once, but I barely remembered it. I had been only nine years old when Papa was arrested for treason. My mother and I were shocked, completely blindsided, but the magistrate’s words to us as my father had been hauled away were clear. Father and a group of merchants and townspeople had been working to overthrow the reign of the sovereign duke. My father roundly denied any involvement, but every member of the faction pointed to him as the leader, the man intended to seize control and rule Winberg. He’d been incarcerated and we’d been stripped of all our property. We’d had no choice but to go begging to my mother’s sister. She and her husband had taken us in, and for the past seven years had fed, clothed and sheltered us, though they were not particularly well off. In exchange I worked alongside my aunt, running and fetching, organizing and planning. They kept up appearances by allowing me a few new dresses to wear to public events so that I could catch a man’s eye. Then they could be rid of me.

It had worked.

I was only fourteen when Captain Huckley came to Norsing on business and attended a local gathering in which I had been allowed to participate. He’d been attentive and flattering, but he was also decidedly old. It never occurred to me that his flattery was an attempt at flirtation until he approached my uncle to make his interest known. Uncle Horace was ecstatic at the offer.

Captain Huckley was a merchant with a fleet of ships. He was not of the noble class, but his abundant wealth made up for that. A betrothal agreement had been struck. I remembered looking to my mother over and over, waiting for her to speak up for me, to object, to tell them no. Or simply to ask my opinion about whether or not I wanted to marry a man a full twenty years older than me. She never had. Instead, when the contract was officially drawn up, I was compelled to sign it as Uncle Horace loomed over me. They hadn’t even allowed me to read it.

So now, only four days after my sixteenth birthday, I was being sent off to my future husband. My trunks were packed and strapped to the hired coach. I was to travel alone to Captain Huckley's house a half day's journey from here. My uncle had spared only a maid to accompany me, in order to keep everything proper. Neither my aunt and uncle nor my mother would attend my wedding. I would simply arrive, be escorted to the church, bound to a man who terrified me, and then expected to be a dutiful wife.

I knew how to run a household. I did not know how to be a wife. I did not want to know.

Uncle Horace gave the driver a nod and looked to me. My mother took that as her cue and took my hands in hers. "Now," she said in a stiff voice. "Hold your head high. Remember who you are. Who are you?" she asked in a whisper that my uncle would not hear.

"Lady Wendolyn Cecilia Stoddard," I answered. It was something my mother had asked me many times over the years. Her way of reminding me that I came from something better and deserved more, but all it really accomplished was to remind me of all I had lost, all my father had taken from us because of ambition.

"That's right," my mother affirmed, then kissed my head and ushered me into the coach where I sat across from my maid, Annabelle. I tried to believe that my mother was doing what she thought was best, but the lack of light in her eyes told me that she had simply given up. She stood back, letting the footman latch the door. If only she would say something, do something so that I would know she cared—not about status or survival, but about me.

My aunt cared so little for me that she wasn't even there to bid me farewell. I didn't bother looking to my uncle for pity or remorse. It was too easy to see what he gained from this. One less mouth to feed and a handsome "investment" into his financial holdings. Uncle Horace was desperate to protect himself. If only my mother had been as desperate to protect me.

And I would need protecting.

Mother refused to give any heed to the rumors. The many wives the captain had had. The way they'd all died. But I heard them, and I knew in my heart of hearts that they were true. My marriage was a death sentence.

"Goodbye, Wendolyn!" my mother called as the coachman climbed up onto the seat.

I turned to look at her, and at my uncle as he stood a little behind her, but I didn't say anything. Bidding them a good anything would have been a lie. So I simply stared until the coach rolled forward, pulling me from their view.

As we clattered down the rutted drive, past the overgrown gardens, I pulled the hem of my cloak into my lap, pressing it between my fingers to reassure myself that they were there. Annabelle's hand covered mine, giving me hope that not all was lost. She and I had been carefully hoarding coins over the past two years, and we had worked together to sew them into my cloak hem, between the layers of fabric. Six gold pieces and nineteen silver. They were our only possible means of salvation, and I had to hope they would be enough.

1

Nine Years Later

Despite the dirt and dust, the stables held a sort of magical glow in the morning, made even more magical by the rapt attention of the children gathered around me for a story. Whenever Her Highness went riding, I would come here to entertain the stable master's children and any others who wished to listen while I waited for her return. "And with one wave of her hand, the pixie Annabelle sprinkled her sparkling, golden dust over the fair maiden, and together they flew away from the evil captain."

"They flew?" five-year-old Lindy asked in a whisper, her eyes wide with the magic of the story. I'd only been here at Sutton Manor for three weeks, but I'd already gained a small audience.

"Yes," I assured her. "For when you have freedom and joy, all you need is just a bit of magic to make your heart so light that it lifts you right off the ground."

"Where did they go?" she asked.

I grinned down at her from my seat on the barrel in the corner of the stables. "The Never Kingdom," I answered. "A magical place ruled by a fairy princess with the kindest heart and the most beautiful smile. A place where the maiden would never be forced to grow up and marry that awful, old captain with the maimed hand and the blackened heart."

"What happened to his hand?" Ansel asked, almost as enchanted by the story as his younger sister.

"A sea monster chewed on it when he was marauding across the seas!"

The stable master's children gasped at my dramatic declaration.

"What did the pixie and the maiden do next?" Lindy asked.

"They had to go their separate ways. The pixie had other young girls who needed her help. But they will always be friends, even if they can't be together."

Lindy smiled in contentment, but Ansel crossed his arms, looking at me with his mouth screwed up to one side. “I thought these stories were supposed to have a prince that saves the girl.”

I laughed at his criticism. “Many do. Would you like me to tell you a story about a dashing hero next time?”

“Yes. And there should be swords,” he stated as a matter of fact. “Like Falstone,” he said, pointing toward the door of the stables. “He’s good with a sword.”

I looked over my shoulder and spotted Princess Marilee’s personal guard, Falstone, there in the doorway. The sun cut in behind him, throwing his shadow onto the packed dirt floor. He was observing quietly the way he always did, his gaze skimming over me the way it always did as he took in the stables, the grooms, the loft overhead.

I resisted the urge to sigh. Falstone would make a fine hero for my stories. He had never given me reason to doubt his motives because he’d never acknowledged me as anything other than a lady’s maid to Princess Marilee.

I remembered all too well my internal upheaval when Marilee was trying to choose which of her father’s guards to keep as her own. It had been disconcerting to have so many new people to deal with. New men. I had done my best to stand tall and not let my intimidation show, but it had been terrifying, especially when Falstone had seen me. Because he hadn’t just looked at me.

That first time we’d met, when he’d walked into the drawing room of Bridgefield with the other soldiers, his eyes had landed on me and done a full assessment. I knew as his scrutinizing gaze swept over me that he saw more than I would wish. He saw *everything*. And for one terrifying moment, I had felt the need to run, far and fast. But then the moment was gone, and once his examination was complete, he moved on. It was as if that one assessment had told him everything he needed to know about me and he was thus free to continue on his way without spending any more time or energy on me.

Since then, he’d not spared me more than a glance unless we were conversing specifically about Marilee.

It had been a relief while at the same time my skin bristled at the slight. But relief won out in the end. After narrowly escaping being sold to Captain Huckley, my need for safety would always win out.

Falstone's gaze fell on me once more where I sat in the stables and I realized that I'd been staring at him, his stance strong and silhouetted by the bright sunlight behind him. I jerked my eyes away, wondering why he was standing there anyway. Was Marilee back from her ride? Wasn't it his job to guard Her Highness?

A bark sounded and Rogue bounded through the doorway, quickly honing in on my tiny circle of children and loping over to receive pats and praise before circling around them and herding them toward the door amid the sound of their giggles.

"It must be time to get back to work." I chuckled as the children squealed in delight. Rogue seemed to consider the little ones to be his personal responsibility. He'd likely try to tuck them all in their beds if anyone would allow it.

Lindy and Ansel ran to their father, Pryce, allowing the stable master to scoop them up for a moment before he sent them out to find their mother. Oliver retrieved his pitch fork and returned to the business of cleaning stalls. At eleven, he was becoming a dedicated stable boy, but he couldn't seem to resist the urge to pause for one of my stories.

I stayed perched on my barrel, watching as Marilee came in as I knew she would. Rogue never strayed far from his owner. Sir James was quick to follow, leading both of their horses by their halters.

"Explain to me again why you are allowed to drench me, but I cannot retaliate." Sir James's smile was wry as he looked to his wife. The princess's new husband was nearly as devoted to Marilee as Rogue was. I noticed the wrinkles in his shirt where he'd likely had to ring it out. By contrast, Marilee's riding habit was entirely dry.

"I told you it wasn't my doing," she said with a not-quite-innocent smile.

"You cannot blame everything on sprites and elves."

"Fairies," Marilee corrected, sounding completely serious.

I grinned. Sir James just shook his head and tried to hide a smile.

Marilee's riding habit was bright, her smile brighter, and I happily soaked in the evidence of her happiness as she and Sir James handed their mounts over to the grooms and headed back out into the sunshine. I'd give them a few moments and then follow. Marilee would need help changing out of her riding habit.

I made my way to the stable doors and leaned my shoulder into the post as I took in my fairy-tale life. Some would think me strange for describing

it in such a way. What servant in their right mind would view their life as charmed?

Me, that's who. Everything I'd told the children about that fair maiden's escape was true. Exaggerated, yes. But true. Annabelle and I had bribed the coachman to take us to the town of Tethurn instead of Huckley's residence. We'd found positions in the same house, working side by side as maids. Life in service had been difficult, more difficult than I had imagined, despite all the work I'd done in my uncle's house. Still, I was determined and work didn't scare me. Though I was a servant instead of a noblewoman, I had gained the one thing that I truly longed for—freedom from men who would control me.

And I *was* free. Especially now that I worked for Princess Marilee and Sir James. Sutton Manor was my home. The place where I was safe, and loved, and free. The place where I was never afraid, never controlled, never abused. This was my Never Kingdom.

After tucking a few rebellious auburn curls under my cap and tying my apron tight, I left the small room that I shared with Emeline. Emeline always woke before I did. Doubtless she was down in the kitchens already, trying to get her hands on ingredients and acquainting herself with the pottery.

I found my way to Princess Marilee's room, where I helped her to dress and arrange her hair.

"Do I look all right?" Marilee asked, reaching up to reposition a few hairs.

"You look lovely, Princess."

"Are you certain?" The tone of her voice made me pay attention. Her eyes were wide, almost wary as she stared at her reflection.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

She looked up at me in the mirror and her eyes flashed from concern to confusion, and then she shook her head and even laughed a little. "I suppose I was." She looked back at her own reflection. "It's habit. Staring at myself in the mirror, wondering what I could do to look exactly right so that Damian wouldn't be angry." Her expression turned wistful. "Oh, how things have changed."

That little reminder of what she'd suffered at the hands of her first husband made my heart ache just a little, while at the same time giving me

immense gratitude for what she'd found with Sir James. "We both know James will always think you look splendid."

"Yes," she said with a smile. "And I think he's just as splendid."

Rogue whined from his spot beside the dressing table, and Marilee turned her smile on him. "Come here," she said, and the hound quickly stood and repositioned himself at his mistress's feet, laying his head on her lap so that he could look up at her with adoring eyes.

I chuckled. "And Rogue here always thinks you're the most wonderful person in the room."

She kissed the dog's head and then stood up. "Am I presentable?" she asked, this time with a smile.

"Perfectly."

"Thank you, as always, Cecily."

I curtsied and watched her exit the room, Rogue following behind.

After putting the room to rights, I decided it could use some more color. I retrieved a basket and left the manor to gather some flowers for Marilee's room. Marilee loved color, and I would happily provide her with more of it. Perhaps I would gather a few for my own room as well. I wandered past the stables and into the trees until I was close to the stream that separated Sutton land from Bridgefield, the house where I had first had the opportunity to serve and eventually befriend Princess Marilee.

Marilee had gone back to her home kingdom of Dalthia five months ago, taking me and two other servants with her. But after she married Sir James, we'd moved back here to Winberg.

I stopped walking when I reached the banks of the stream, caught for a moment in the strangeness of my new life. I'd heard that Bridgefield was only now occupied by minimal staff whose job it was to keep it up until such a time as the duke's family might have need of it again. Mr. Tennsworth had stayed on there, keeping his position as groundskeeper, too old to want to uproot his simple life. Emeline and I had gone to visit him a few days ago, and he'd told us that the duke and his wife hadn't come back since Lord Rockwell's death. Princess Marilee and Lord Damian Rockwell had been married only eight months when he died.

I shook off the memories and kept walking, choosing the biggest and brightest blooms that I could find. My work was quick since the heat of the day was increasing, and I wanted to return before the flowers had a chance to wilt.

On my return, I headed toward the kitchen, hoping that Emeline could find me a tall cup that we could use as a vase for our room. But as I rounded the corner of the house, I stopped at the sight that met me. In the open space to the side of the garden, four young boys were gathered. Each was standing at attention as Falstone stood in front of them, giving instructions. Ansel and Oliver I recognized from seeing them in the stables over the past weeks. I couldn't be sure if I knew the other two or not.

I stayed where I was, not wanting to draw attention to myself before I could discover what was happening. The boys ranged in age from Ansel, who was about seven, to a boy I didn't recognize who looked to be older than Oliver, perhaps twelve or thirteen. Falstone rose a fist and I flinched before realizing that he was demonstrating. He showed them his fist from every angle and then punched it into his hand, all the while speaking words I couldn't hear as the boys looked on with rapt attention. Then he called Ansel forward and waited for the child to make the proper fist before holding up his hand. The boy took a practice swing at Falstone's hand.

What was happening here?

I watched for a few more minutes as he took the time to instruct each child. Then I realized I couldn't watch forever and carefully made my way toward the kitchen door, trying to avoid notice.

I slipped inside and found the nearest window. I looked out on the scene and then turned to Emeline. "What's going on out there?" I asked.

Emeline took a breath, preparing to answer. Emeline was thirteen and spoke very little, but she was like a younger sister to me.

Explaining anything with more than a few words was difficult for her, so I could feel her relief when the cook, Diana, responded as she worked to peel a pile of vegetables. "Falstone, you mean?"

I nodded then returned my eyes to the scene outside.

Diana chuckled. "He's got his little band of warriors back together again."

I turned to look at her. "Band of warriors?"

She smiled indulgently. "It started with Johnny, whom I suppose you'll remember from Bridgefield."

"Yes, I remember."

"I guess word got back to Falstone that Johnny had aspirations of being a soldier," Diana continued, "and he took it on himself, started teaching him a

thing or two. Ways to defend himself. Even started training him with a wooden sword.”

“When was this?”

“Not long before you all left for Dalthia. Anyway, Johnny’s been anxious for Falstone to come back. And as you can see”—she nodded toward the yard—“he’s recruited several of his friends to join.”

“I know two of them work here, but is that other one from Bridgefield like Johnny?”

She nodded. “That’s the usual group. Though sometimes a couple of the village boys join in as well. The bloke who delivers the vegetables has a son who likes to come along now and again. They’re a right fun bunch to watch. Falstone’s doing a good thing here.”

“Yes,” I agreed, even as my mind tumbled. Did I know who Falstone was at all? No, I suppose I didn’t.

I pulled my gaze from the window and managed to pilfer a cup from the cupboard and put it in my basket before making my way back to Marilee’s room to arrange her flowers.

I was eating dinner down in the kitchens with several other servants—interrupted periodically by Emeline coming over to make me try a bite of a soup that she was working on—when Princess Marilee’s guards, Falstone and Marcus, walked in.

Marcus came immediately to sit at the table, but Falstone detoured to where Emeline was working and leaned down to inhale the fragrance of her bubbling soup. “Mm,” he said, sounding pleased. “Something new?”

She nodded, glancing up at him with the tiniest smile, the compliment bolstering her courage.

“Well done,” he said simply, then came back toward the table.

I was staring. I shouldn’t have stared, but I couldn’t help myself. Seeing him this morning with the young servant boys had piqued my curiosity. I’d known he was strong and protective from the way he took care of Marilee, but seeing the way he interacted with children, with shy and quiet Emeline...

He looked up and caught me staring at him.

And then his face lit up, like he was delighted to see me. It was the oddest thing. He had always been professional, almost stoic in our

interactions. Why was he suddenly looking *happy* to see me, when he'd always looked past me before?

I dropped my eyes and fixed them on the plate before me, trying to gather my wits. The chair across from me scraped against the stone floor. Falstone had caught me staring, and now he was sitting across from me and my face was getting hot. I should leave. I'd eaten enough, hadn't I? Yes, I was full.

Pushing to my feet, I gathered my dishes quickly while trying not to look as though I were in a hurry—which I absolutely was. I placed them in the sink and didn't bother to respond to Emeline's confused look as I fled.

I stood just outside the door in the dim, empty corridor for a moment, my eyes pinched shut and a hand at my stomach. The way his face had lit up had made my stomach drop in a way that was not entirely unpleasant. It was...what? Flattering? But at the same time, it made me want to close in on myself. I had no desire to lend him my trust, only to have him betray it.

2

“You promised this one would be about a prince,” Ansel reminded me.

“Yes, of course. One wielding a sword, was it?” I asked from where I stood in one of the stalls, stroking the horse’s head. I missed being around horses. I missed riding them. It was a privilege that had only been afforded me before I’d moved to Uncle Horace’s home—before I had lost everything.

“Mm-hmm,” Ansel affirmed from his position straddling the stall gate. It had made me nervous the first couple times I’d seen him perched up there, but I quickly realized that children who grow up in stables alongside their father know how to navigate them far better than I.

Lindy had climbed halfway up, her feet wedged between a couple slats so that she could rest her forearms atop the gate. “I don’t like swords.”

I smiled at her bold statement and started my tale. “In the enchanted kingdom of Lumptin, where the meadows stretch with heather and the hills never stop rolling, a prince disguised himself as a soldier.”

Ansel straightened up. “Was his name Falstone?”

“Of course not.” I tsked as I continued to stoke the horse’s neck. “He’s a prince in disguise, and his name is Walstone.”

Ansel cackled in delight. “And did he train young servants to be great warriors?”

“But of *course* he did. That was his greatest joy, to train up the bravest of young boys so that they too could protect the fair kingdom. And his favorite two students were Chansel”—I speared my gaze at Ansel—“and Blindy.” I gave Lindy a wink.

My story wandered on and on for some time as I allowed Ansel and Lindy to direct its path. I managed to put them into fits of giggles several times, and I even caught Pryce and a couple of the grooms with grins on their faces as I made the story more and more ridiculous.

“And now, my young ones,” I said, stepping out of the stall after I’d drawn the story to a close. “I must fly away and assist the fairy princess in dressing, for I am certain she has balls and parties to attend all the day long.” I did my best to float out of the stables while waving my hand daintily in farewell. Pryce snorted at my dramatic exit.

I chuckled to myself as I made my way back to the house. The nearest entrance was not through the kitchen, but I went that way anyway, glad when I found Emeline coming back from the garden with a basket of vegetables. “Hello, dear,” I said as I gave her a squeeze from the side. “How are things with Diana?”

“She’s nice.”

“Good. Do you miss having the run of the kitchen?” I asked. She had bloomed out of her quiet shell just a little when it had just been the four of us there at Bridgefield. However, she’d shrunk back in on herself once our quiet little haven was interrupted by the arrival of a full house of servants, then our relocation to Dalthia, Marilee’s marriage, and our return here. Now she was the undercook and already impressing the head cook with her skill and efficiency.

She shrugged. “Gotten used to it.”

“Good. And I still love your biscuits the best.”

She grinned and we waved our goodbyes.

I slipped through the kitchen and into the main house. I was about to go upstairs when I heard singing drifting from down the hallway. I went farther down the corridor and peeked into the music room. Sir James sat on a chair, his viol between his knees as he drew the bow across the strings. Princess Marilee sat right next to him, singing along with the tune, a small smile curving her mouth, her eyes fixed on her husband. My chest swelled with happiness at the sight, at the love they’d found despite the odds that seemed so highly stacked against us all.

“Spying, are you?” a voice asked from behind.

I turned to see Beatrice, looking fierce in her crisp head maid uniform. Or at least as fierce as one can look when they have the temperament of a grandmother wishing to care for one and all. I waved off her reprimand.

“You know they are oblivious to anyone else.”

She smiled, content. “Yes. However, they are the master and mistress of the house, and we don’t want to give the impression that we condone spying on them.”

I huffed a sigh and stepped away from the door. "Yes, I know. And you know I hold Her Highness in the highest respect."

She nodded and looped her arm through mine as we made our way down the hall. "We all do."

The following day, I stepped out of Marilee's room, a bundle of laundry in my arms. As I turned to close the door, my back bumped into something. I spun around, the clothing dropping to the floor as my hand flew to my startled heart.

"My apologies," Falstone said as he bent to retrieve the items I had dropped.

I took one moment to shake off my surprise then bent as well. No need for him to do my work for me. "Thank you, I have it," I said, taking the clothes from his arms then rising so I could hurry away.

"You'll not stop to speak with me?" he called out before I got too far.

I turned, my face no doubt marred by confusion. "My apologies. I did not realize you needed to speak with me. Is it about the princess?"

A slow smile tugged at his mouth. "No, this is nothing official. I only... hoped to have a word with you."

I blinked. "With me?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. Why?"

He shifted back on one foot. "To know you better, I suppose."

I gaped for a moment, uncomprehending. "We have both been working for the princess for quite some time. You have never wished to know me better before."

He cleared his throat in a show of nerves I'd never seen before. "My position required a good deal more of my attention when we were at Bridgefield. I could not risk being distracted."

My brow felt as though it rose all the way to my hairline. "Distracted?"

"Yes."

His firm answer made my eyes widen. "Are you suggesting that *I* am a distraction?"

"Most assuredly." He tried for a smile, but it never fully formed.

My chest tightened at the heat in his words.

His assertion was shocking. I was not some young girl, fresh-faced and ready for romance. That privilege had never been afforded me. Thus I did

not know how to respond to such a statement. So I stood there, wide-eyed, until I realized that trying to respond in any way would only leave me embarrassed. I shook myself from my stupor and turned, walking away. Perhaps I should have stayed, but really, what response could I have given? His words sounded as though he saw me as more than just a fellow employee. And though I tried to tell myself I had no reason to fear him, the thought of him seeking me out to know me better was not something I could accept. Not now. Perhaps not ever.

I glanced over my shoulder and saw that he stood where I'd left him, his gaze concerned as he watched me. I turned away again.

The truth was that I admired Falstone. All my observations of him had led me to believe that he was solid, reliable and good. But he was always aloof, which I had assumed made him safe. It was part of the reason I was happy to fashion stories about him.

I sucked in a sharp breath as the pieces fell into place. The stories. Was *that* what his odd new interest was about? Had he heard me telling the tales of "Walstone" to the children in the stables? The thought made humiliation wash over me. I must have sounded like such a little fool. I would have to stop those stories right away. I could not allow him to believe that I was some simpering maiden, desperate for attention and ready to slather compliments on any man wielding a sword.

I would have to do my best to ignore him, lest he think I wanted anything from him. I turned the problem over and over in my mind as I made my way below stairs.

After taking care of Marilee's laundry, I realized I had nothing to do for the time being. There was work to do, certainly, but my duties were now finite and specific instead of all-encompassing. It was so different from Bridgefield. After Master Damian died and the princess fired the rest of the staff, it was left to the four of us to run the household. Beatrice, Emeline and I had worked together, doing what needed to be done, half the time joined in our work by Princess Marilee herself. It was a dynamic that was impossible to continue once we were part of a well-managed staff.

So instead of pacing and wringing my hands over the oddity of Falstone and my lack of pressing duties, I made my way down to the kitchens and found Emeline working away over a pile of dough. Her blonde hair was confined to a braid for practicality's sake, and her entire person was dusted liberally in flour. Several staff members were in the kitchen with her, sitting

at the rough wood table to partake of their own meal, but I knew the thirteen-year-old would wait until she could sit by herself to eat. That way she wouldn't be expected to speak with anyone.

I sat on a stool close to her, drawing designs in the flour spread over the countertop. Emeline looked up at me, observing me in her quiet way as her hands continued to work. Then her brow furrowed in question. "Cecily?" It was her way of asking me if I was all right, or if I had a story to tell, or simply a concern. It was her way of inviting my confidence.

Confiding in Emeline was easy. Though she was more than ten years my junior, she had an old soul. "Falstone came to speak with me," I admitted in consternation.

Her brow jumped in interest, but she said nothing.

"And not about the princess, but just...to talk." My shoulders slumped as I looked at her, but she only raised one corner of her mouth in commiseration. "Do you think it meant something?"

"Meant something?"

"I don't know," I lamented, gathering my thick hair over one shoulder with nervous hands. "It felt meaningful. He's never just spoken *to me* before, so it might have meant something. But then, it might be nothing. I *hope* it's nothing. I can't have him..." My gaze dropped to my hands, caught in the tangles of my hair. "I don't want him to..."

"See you?" she suggested.

I was always amazed at how much Emeline saw. "Yes. What if he has an interest in me? What in the world would I do then?" I asked in a whisper so that only she would hear.

The corner of her mouth and one eyebrow curled up as she gave a little shrug. "Get to know him?"

I gave a vehement shake of my head. "You know I don't want that."

Emeline looked down again, speaking to the pile of dough in front of her. "Not all men are like Lord Rockwell."

"They're not all like Mr. Sutton either." I propped my elbows on the counter and rested my head in my hands, frustrated that every man I encountered had the potential for both extremes inside him. "And I don't trust myself to know the difference."

"Why not?"

I gave her a sad smile. *Because I was wrong about my own father.* His treason had cost me everything. "I'll let you get back to work." I stood and

kissed the top of her head.

As I went about my work, I tried to reconcile the past few days with the past year. Watching Falstone with those children, having him speak to me... how could he be the same man who had been stoic and aloof—safe because he never gave me a second glance?

I kept coming back to my stories. He must have heard them. He must think I wanted something from him.

I did not.

3

I tried not to be curious. I tried to avoid Falstone altogether, but it seemed my feet had different ideas, because they carried me to the windows constantly as I continued to look down into the yard by the gardens, wondering if I'd catch a glimpse of Falstone and his band of warriors again. And then when I did catch a glimpse two days after finding him the first time, my feet carried me downstairs and outside, basket in hand, though Marilee's flowers were still fresh and thriving.

Instead of going to find the wildflowers that dotted the edges of the stream, I went into the little flower garden that sat alongside the vegetable garden behind the kitchen. The flowers and bushes were dense enough, and some tall enough, that I could stay somewhat concealed as I went about my task while still giving myself a view of Falstone and the youngsters, which today included a small girl amidst the boys. I moved slowly, hoping to avoid any sudden movement that might draw attention.

Falstone had the four boys paired off, instructing them on how to properly hold a sword and how to plant their feet. He himself paired off with the one little girl, dropping to his knees so that he was down on her level.

I wandered the garden, gathering a few blooms while keeping an eye on Falstone and the children as they slowly and deliberately clashed swords. It was clear he was a hero in their eyes, and it made a little spark burn in my chest. Children deserved to have a hero. I'd worshipped my father. He'd been loving and attentive and kind. Until he was gone, having chosen a need for power over his daughter and wife. I'd never reconciled the two versions of my father—the one from my bright, happy childhood and the one who left me with a life of pain and misery. Hopefully Falstone would not let these children down.

As I watched their swordplay, Falstone looked up and caught my eye. I stepped out of sight, embarrassed that I'd been caught spying. Honestly, if I

had just smiled, he probably wouldn't have thought anything of it. I'm certain he knew that the children were adorable. Surely others stopped to watch on occasion. But by hiding, I'd given away the fact that I *had* been spying, and he would likely think that I was being coy—flirting. I cringed at the thought. Clearly, spying was not a career option for me.

I dared to glance back at him, but he was crouched down with the children circled around him, probably giving instructions. I went back to gathering, determined to keep my mind and my eyes on the task at hand.

It wasn't more than a few moments later when the determined cries of children entered the small garden area.

I looked up to see the children streaming toward me with their swords at the ready (though the little girl's was dragging on the ground).

"Miss Cecily, you are in danger," one boy called as he leapt over a row of flowers. He was the young man from Bridgefield whose name I didn't know.

A smile curved my lips. "Oh, really?" I asked, more than a little skeptical.

"Yes," Ansel answered, joining us. "There is an evil sorceress lurking. We are to take you to safety. Come!" He gestured toward the open yard while looking to his left and right, a good little protector, always on guard.

"Oh dear!" I dropped my basket and reached out to Johnny, who was the oldest. "I am so very frightened. Do help me to escape," I entreated in my best damsel-in-distress voice.

He grabbed my hand and we dashed out of the garden, surrounded by the other children, who were being surprisingly vigilant about keeping an eye out for any further dangers.

Falstone stood waiting for us, a grin on his face, a hand on the hilt of the wooden sword that was tucked into his belt. He clapped as we approached. "Well done, trainees. Now," he said, looking around at each of them individually, building suspense for what he would say next. "What would you do if *I* were the villain?!" He suddenly crouched into an offensive stance, pulling his wooden sword from his belt.

The children immediately raised their own weapons to fend him off and my own heart seemed to beat double time, not because of his villainous act, but because I'd never seen him act thus before.

He took a menacing step forward. "I'm here to capture the fair maiden and force her to scrub all the floors in my mansion, which has *one hundred rooms!*"

I let out a dramatic gasp and put the back of my hand to my head. “Scrubbing floors! In over one hundred rooms. It is a fate worse than *death*.”

A smile cracked through Falston’s evil glare. “Quickly, children! How will you protect her?” He started circling to one side, playing the menacing villain.

“Gretchen, Ansel!” Johnny called out. “Take the maiden to safety in the garden. Oliver, Tyson, you act as my flanks so he can’t get around us.”

Gretchen ran over and grabbed my hand with her tiny one, towing me away as Ansel followed us by walking backward, never giving his back to the enemy or lowering his sword.

“Let’s move,” Johnny said, and they each shifted to their positions, moving somewhat in unison as they closed in on the villainous threat.

“You’ll not take my prize. I am determined to have my floors sparkle and shine!” Falstone raised his sword, swinging it toward Johnny in slow motion. Johnny was able to meet Falstone’s sword with his own.

While Falstone engaged in an epic battle with his three opponents, he kept instructing. “Now, Gretchen and Ansel, you must pay attention to your surroundings. Look around so that you know all of the escapes you might be able to use. Perhaps you can even find something that the maiden can use to defend herself. A stick or a rock.”

Ansel quickly put a long twig (thin and brittle enough that it would do nothing at all against an attacker) into my hands.

“You’ve fallen, Oliver,” Falstone said as he held Oliver’s sword arm with one hand and sliced across his chest with the other.

He quickly dispatched Johnny and Tyson as well. “Aha!” He said in triumph. “Now there are only two defenders. “Are you ready to give up now, Ansel?” Falstone goaded with a grin as he entered the garden.

“Umm...” Ansel hesitated with a nervous giggle.

“Are you going to choose to save yourself, or will you protect the fair maiden to the end?”

Ansel looked unsure, and I couldn’t blame him. Johnny lay with his tongue lolling out of his mouth. Oliver kept crying, “I’m bleeding! I’m going to die!” and Tyson was moaning dramatically.

It was Gretchen who surprised us all, jumping in front of me and holding up her sword with both hands. “You can’t take her because you’re a bad man!”

Falstone's sword tip dropped to the ground at his side and he threw his head back, laughing. "Very good, Miss Gretchen!" he complimented. "That is exactly the right answer." He crouched down on his haunches. "If you are going to be a protector, you have to fight to the very end to protect them. But"—his face became serious—"that won't be until you all are much older and have a lot more training. Understand?"

Gretchen nodded. Ansel looked up at me, his nose wrinkled. "Sorry I didn't want to protect you all the way."

I chuckled. "That's quite all right. You're a little young for such responsibilities now."

He sighed. "I guess so."

"All right," Falstone said, standing up again. "Let's gather with the others."

Gretchen and Ansel ran off to join the three wounded soldiers, who were now climbing to their feet.

Falstone turned to me with a grin and bowed. "Thank you, my lady, for playing along."

"My pleasure," I said, and I meant it. As Falstone went off with the children, I was left standing there in awe, wondering what it was that I'd just witnessed. He'd so easily drawn me into the fun of his training session, as though it was the most natural thing to interact with me in such a way. And it had been. It was easy and fun and I wished for more. Yet I was having a difficult time reconciling this Falstone with the one who had guarded Marilee with such dedication and single-mindedness.

The next morning, after sending Marilee down to breakfast, I fell into the lone work of tidying her dressing room, putting away the clothing that had been brought up by the laundress, and mending loose hems.

Then I moved on to the task of brushing off Marilee's clothes, the steady rhythm and shushing of the work lulling me into a mindless stupor.

"You've been here a long time."

I started and spun at the sound of Falstone's voice, knocking my hand into a table as I turned. The thimble I'd been using for mending fell to the ground and skittered across the floor.

Falstone stooped to retrieve it then straightened, standing tall in the doorway, shoulders back, head high—strength incarnate.

"I beg your pardon?"

“You’ve been here a long time. Working.” He rocked back on his heels and then rolled up onto his toes.

“Have I?” What an odd observation. “I didn’t think my chore was taking me an inordinate amount of time.”

“No.” He shook his head, looking frustrated and so different from the confident, teasing man of yesterday. “Not here in this room. I mean here in this position. You were with the princess before, and I believe you worked for Lord Rockwell even before the princess became Lady Rockwell.”

“Yes. I was.” Those years had not been what I would term pleasant, but neither had they been unbearable.

“I did not know him,” he said as he took a hesitant step into the room. “Lord Rockwell, I mean.”

“Yes, I know,” I commented, wondering where exactly this conversation was headed. “And you were lucky for it.”

He nodded. “That much is clear.” He was so stiff and formal, much the way I’d always seen him. But it seemed strange now, after I’d seen him playacting with his little warriors. After he’d declared he would kidnap me and force me to make his floors sparkle and shine. His return to professionalism made me miss the other side of him that I’d seen.

I waited for him to say more. Why was he asking about Master Damian now? It had been months since he’d started working for Her Highness, and even longer since Lord Rockwell had died. If he was looking for some sort of insight to help with his job, his questions would have been better asked when he first arrived. Not now that the princess was remarried and settled in a new home.

“How did you come to be in his employ?” he finally asked.

I blew out a breath and cast my eyes toward the ceiling. *How, indeed.* I supposed this was his way of getting to know me better as he’d mentioned two weeks ago. But I still couldn’t decide if that prospect was exciting or terrifying.

“Did you grow up in service?” he asked.

No. But if I said no, then he would wonder why not. The poor had to work, and unless I claimed to have grown up in the country, working a farm with my family, then the simplest answer to his question was the easy lie.

“Yes.”

“Did you always work for the Rockwells?”

“No.” I turned back to the gowns hanging before me and continued to brush them out. “I, uh...I started at a small estate in Tethurn.” Which was true, though I hadn’t been a child. “I was lucky enough to make the acquaintance of another maid there, Annabelle. She had much more experience than I did, and she taught me everything that she could.”

The truth was that she hadn’t needed to teach me how to work. I’d learned that by obeying the barked orders of my uncle and the passive-aggressive comments of my aunt. But Annabelle had taught me how to run. How to survive. She had helped me in so many ways and never asked me for anything. She had a good heart. She cared for people.

“Why did you leave that position?”

“I had my reasons.” And they were not reasons I wished to discuss with him.

“Did someone there hurt you?”

My head snapped up to look at him. “What?” It was such an abrupt change of topic. “Why would you ask that?” A bit of defensiveness crept into my voice, because yes, someone had. But how could he know that? And why would he ask such a strangely personal question at this moment?

He looked down, a veil of uncertainty that I’d never seen before clouding his features. “I apologize, but I...I’ve always had a sort of gift, I suppose you’d call it.”

“A gift?” What did that have to do with his question?

“A discernment. It’s what makes me good at what I do—and yes, I’m arrogant enough to say that I’m very good at what I do.” A hint of a smile peeked out but was quickly gone. “That’s because I can sense when people are frightened as opposed to nervous. I know when someone is lying. I can pick up on a lot of things so long as I am paying attention.”

I took a step back, the action involuntary, as was the way my hand fluttered to my throat.

“For example,” he said, gesturing toward me. “What I said just now made you nervous, perhaps even frightened. Likely because you don’t relish the idea of someone knowing things about you that you don’t want to divulge.”

I pursed my lips, his little demonstration making me even more wary. He knew things and saw things. Is that what all of our interaction thus far had been about? Was he trying to learn things about me? To manipulate me? The way he looked at me now was so different from our recent interactions that the contradiction reminded me of Captain Huckley. The captain had

done all he could to learn everything about me, to convince me that we belonged together, to make me ignore all the evidence of what he truly was.

Falstone noted my expression and held out a staying hand. “Rest assured I have no intention of prying where I am not welcome. I just offer that by way of explanation for my question.”

I remained silent, afraid to say anything at all, even if I could come up with some sort of response.

“I’m sorry I’ve made you nervous. I don’t usually ask things without thinking it through, but for some reason—today...” He ran his finger and thumb across his forehead, looking more unsure than I’d ever seen him before.

Was he nervous?

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “I was hoping to have some sort of normal conversation with you, but I seem to be quite inept. I apologize.” He bowed and turned to go.

His abrupt departure made me blink in shock, but I let him walk away, not knowing what to say. Worry coursed through me. Worry that he’d see too much or that he’d see through my lies if I allowed him to continue.

But the way he had left bothered me. He’d acted as if by not answering his very personal questions I was somehow hurting him. And that felt entirely unfair. I had admired this man for some time now, and it felt almost like a betrayal for him to judge me so quickly. So after a few moments of indecision, I threw down the brush and went after him. Looking out in the hallway, I saw him striding toward the end of the corridor to my left, almost to the corner where he would disappear from sight. “Falstone,” I called.

He spun to look at me, embarrassment written on his face. How was it that I had the power to embarrass this strong, capable, and—by his own admission—arrogant man?

I walked toward him, determined and a little angry about how things had played out between us. When I was only a few paces away, I stopped, letting him study me, knowing he would see my frustration and anger. “You never spoke to me before,” I pointed out. “And then suddenly—”

“As I tried to explain before, my position required a great deal—”

“You never gave me a second glance. You were nothing but professional and aloof.” And though that had been odd, it had also been *safe*.

“I know.” He looked pained, and still embarrassed. “I didn’t realize how abrupt this might seem, but I couldn’t seem to balance—”

“And now you walk in, and you seem to see right through me and you ask if I’ve been hurt.” I swallowed down a lump in my throat. “As though it would be easy to answer. As though you had earned my confidence.”

He shut his eyes, clearly upset with himself.

“So why don’t you look at me now, and use that *gift* of yours to determine how that makes me feel.” Perhaps he could name my feelings even if I couldn’t. Part of me wanted to be mad, but really I was just confused and scared. Confused that he could want to get to know me in any sort of genuine way, and scared that he wasn’t who I thought he was.

His face fell, sadness settling over it as he took in my features, my body language. “I’m sorry” was all he said.

“As am I,” I confessed. “Because I would like to know you better, Falstone.” That admission was terrifying. “I would like to know your first name. I would like to know who you are. I would like to know what prompted you to take a band of children under your wing. But confidences such as that do not come easily to me, and it is unfair of you to ask it of me when you’ve given me no reason to trust you with such personal information.” I swallowed. Information like that in the wrong hands could be dangerous.

He pressed his lips together, his head nodding up and down just a little, accepting what I had said. “I am truly sorry, Cecily. I have injured you, and that was never my intent.” He tapped a middle finger against his thigh. “I think perhaps I was meant to be a soldier only, since I don’t appear to have the skill of a friend.” A self-deprecating smile glanced across his mouth. “I will do my best to remedy that.” He gave me a very formal bow, completely unnecessary since I was a servant, then looked up at me. “And my given name is Porter, but I prefer Falstone,” he said before turning and continuing around the corner.

I huffed and spun around, my skirt whipping around my legs as I stalked down the corridor and ran down the servants’ stairs until I reached the kitchens.

Emeline was in full meal preparation at the right hand of the head cook.

“Emeline doesn’t have time to talk, Cecily,” Diana chastised.

“Emeline never talks if she can help it. And I’m not here to yammer. I’m here to help. Might I chop something?”

Cook gave me a disbelieving look and then slid a knife and a pile of onions my way. “Have a burr under your skin, do you?”

I simply glared and cut into an onion with gusto. After several slices, I looked up to see Emeline with a knowing look in her eye. “Falstone?” she asked.

I just sighed.

“Thought so,” she said with an impish smile.

“How could you know it was him?” I asked in a frustrated whisper. “He and I rarely speak.”

“You were staring at him out the window just the other morning.”

I dropped my gaze, refusing to meet her eye. “I was watching the children.”

“He likes you.”

“He—” I started to protest, but Emeline skewered me with her eyes and I deflated, finishing my declaration with a weak, “doesn’t.”

She just hitched her eyebrows a bit further to show her disagreement.

I let out a sigh. “He’s very confusing.”

It wasn’t until that afternoon that I realized I didn’t know where my thimble had ended up.

4

After more than a month at Sutton Manor, I was starting to feel at ease, accepted by the staff and comfortable in my duties. Then a maid found me as I was sweeping off the rug in Marilee's dressing room. Her face was doused in confusion as she said, "The princess requests your company out on the veranda."

Oh. Was this... "The veranda?" I asked, hoping to glean more information.

"For tea," she answered, her confusion deepening.

"Yes," I tried to say with a smile. "It's an unusual habit Her Highness developed when it was only her and us at Bridgefield."

The maid blinked but didn't respond. I wasn't sure what I expected her to say. I just wanted to provide some clarity to the glaring breach in protocol. Princesses did not have tea with servants.

The maid left, having delivered her message and taking her consternation with her. I squeezed the bridge of my nose between my thumb and finger. I truly hoped that this did not put me in an awkward position with the other maids.

I set my broom aside and brushed off my apron before making my way downstairs. Whether or not it would strain my relationship with the other servants, when a princess summons you, you go.

I stepped out onto the veranda as a footman finished setting out the cutlery then straightened and caught my eye. He tried to keep his face blank, but there was a slight glare in his gaze.

I couldn't blame him. It was all highly irregular and showed blatant favoritism.

Marilee arrived a moment later, tugging Emeline by the hand. "Come, sit down," she said as Beatrice trailed out after them. "I've missed this."

The footman pulled out Marilee's chair and she sat down with a brilliant smile and a happy sigh, which caused him to look further befuddled.

Emeline, Beatrice and I all sat without assistance. Asking other servants to wait on us would be more than just irregular. It would be insulting. The footman bowed and left to stand just inside the doors.

I had to say something. “Princess?”

“Yes, Cecily?” she asked with a bright smile as she reached for a pastry.

“Do you think it’s a good idea for us to continue this habit?”

She blinked in surprise. “Of course! Why would it not be?”

“Well...” Oh, how I wished to convey my worry without hurting this dear woman’s feelings. “When it was just us at Bridgefield, it was all well and good to bend the rules and do as we wished, but now, with you as mistress of the house, and a full staff who might take offense to such a thing...”

She was shaking her head.

“These are good people,” I continued, noting that the footman who stood just inside the door seemed to be shifting to better hear what I was saying. Good. I hoped he heard. “Loyal servants who will no doubt love you, but treating us in such a preferential way—”

“I won’t hear anymore about it” was her response.

“But, Princess—”

“I understand that our friendship is unique and not the done thing, but I don’t care. People can learn to accept it, or they can ignore it. Either option is fine by me.” Her sudden shift from light and happy to serious and stern was jarring. “But they are not the ones who stood by me. They are not the ones who took on the running of an entire household when their half-crazed mistress fired all the other staff.”

My face fell along with my shoulders. I hated when she referred to herself that way.

“They are not the ones who quite literally saved my life and my sanity.” She looked at me with such affection that I could not argue. “You did that. You three are not servants to me. You are my friends. And I’m very sorry if that makes things uncomfortable for you, but I—” She grabbed hold of both my and Emeline’s hands and directed her gaze at Beatrice. “I find I simply cannot give you up.”

Emeline scooted closer and laid her head against Marilee’s shoulder. “I like having tea with you.”

Leave it to Emeline to make me feel like an ungrateful wretch. And really she was right. What did I care if a few servants were envious? Was it worth hurting my friend in order to keep myself as low and invisible as possible?

“Shall I pour?” Beatrice asked as if that was the end of it.

And it was.

Except that it was only the beginning. Marilee never did anything by halves.

She sought me out a few days later, breezing through the doorway and looking relieved to find me. “There you are,” she breathed as though it had been a sore trial to find me.

“Here I am indeed, right where I should be,” I said as I tugged the coverlet in place over her bed.

“Do you know how to ride?” she asked without responding to my teasing.

“Ride?”

“A horse.”

“I...knew how when I was younger. My father put me on a horse nearly as soon as I could walk, but I was only nine when he was taken away and I moved to my uncle’s house. After that, I was only allowed the use of a horse three or four times in the six years I spent there.”

“So you have not ridden since you were how old?” Marilee knew the basics of my past, but I tended to avoid the topic and never spoke of it in detail.

“I was...fifteen the last time I rode,” I said as I smoothed the last wrinkles. “But it was only a short walk around a park.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Of course.” I had missed it greatly when that pleasure was stripped from me along with so many others. It was why I visited the stables.

She held out a hand. “Then come with me.”

I took it, trusting her completely but befuddled nonetheless. “Where are we going, Your Highness?”

“You’re going to sit a horse again.”

The idea lit a happy lamp in my heart. “Why the sudden need to put me on a horse?”

She wrapped my arm around hers, a carefree smile stretching her face. “So that you can go riding with me whenever I want. I can’t always drag James along with me, and now that I have plenty of horses to offer, I think it’s time you kept me company. It’s all very selfish, I assure you.”

“Ah,” I nearly laughed. That made sense. She had spent a good amount of time in Dalthia galavanting about with her sisters, Sir James, or both. It was

no surprise she wanted to continue, especially when Sir James had some of the best horseflesh around.

We stopped at her room so that she could force me into one of her riding skirts, then headed outside.

“I shall have an expert tutor you so that you will be comfortable again in no time.”

We arrived at the stables and I wondered which groom she would select to instruct me.

“Falstone,” Marilee called.

I looked to the other end of the stables, where Falstone was brushing a horse. Surely not...

“Good afternoon, Princess. Is our pupil ready?” He shifted his eyes to me.

My stomach dropped. We had not spoken since I had told him of my displeasure with his prying questions. And now we were to be thrown together, likely in close proximity, for at least the afternoon, if not longer.

“Yes,” Marilee answered. “And I believe she will be a quick study. Cecily.” She turned to address me. “Enjoy your time, and come find me when you’ve had enough for the day.”

Despite being taken aback by her abrupt departure, I sank into a curtsy without thought even as I stared wide-eyed at her retreating back. Why had she chosen Falstone to instruct me? Why not a groom?

“Are you ready?”

I turned back to Falstone and affixed a smile to my face. “Yes. I believe so.”

He gave me a friendly smile and I was grateful to see that at least he was not going to be sullen. I had no wish for him to be hurt over my words. I had simply been trying to employ as much honesty as I could manage.

He motioned his head toward the horse. “Come say hello so that Darling can know who she’ll be carrying.”

I latched on to the distraction and went to take the mare’s head in my hands, petting her long face and looking into her eyes as she snuffled my neck.

“Very good,” Falstone encouraged. He seemed a natural teacher, and it was good to see him at ease.

“I’m sorry Marilee is making you tutor me. I’m certain you have more important things to do.”

A chagrined smile curved his mouth. "I think the princess felt a need to find an occupation for me. That's the funny thing about my profession. There are times when my presence is absolutely necessary, and times like this, when I am almost superfluous." He focused once again on the horse. "Shall we get you up?"

"Yes," I said, my heart fluttering with excitement as I stepped to the mare's side.

Falstone clasped his hands together and bent to give me a leg up.

Instinct and memory took over, and before he could direct me in any way, I grabbed the pommel with one hand, pulled my skirts clear of my shoe with the other, and set my foot in his hands in anticipation of him boosting me up. Fortunately I remembered myself before going any further. If I had jumped straight into the side saddle, he would have been suspicious indeed.

"Very good," he complimented. "Now you'll want to jump with your right foot and push down on my hands with your left so that I can heft you up. Do you think you can do that?"

I certainly hoped so. "I'll give it a try."

There was a bit of a wobble, but I landed in the saddle without much fuss.

"You'll need to hook your knee over the pommel and adjust until you feel steady," Falstone prompted.

I did so, feeling my posture naturally straighten into the noble bearing I'd learned as a child when my father had patiently taught me. When I looked down it was to see Falstone's intense gaze resting on me. Not in a suspicious way, but almost as though he were impressed.

"You sit a horse very naturally," he complimented.

I held his gaze for a moment more, then looked away, not wanting him to see the lies on my face. "Thank you."

"Have you had an opportunity to ride before?"

I wanted to say yes, make up an excuse so that I could ride without holding back at all. But what plausible excuse could I come up with? As far as Falstone knew, I had been nothing but an above-stairs maid before Lord Rockwell died. I could conceive of no reason that I would have been afforded that experience if I had grown up as a commoner. I suppose I could have told him the truth, that I had been born into the noble class. But soon after my arrival at Bridgefield, Beatrice and I had agreed I should keep that to myself. Damian's servants tended to either envy or resent me when they heard.

“No, of course not,” I said, but I could tell by the lift of his brow that he had noticed my hesitance.

He looked at me and I tried not to squirm, but he said nothing, instead taking the reins of my horse and leading her out into the yard. Another horse awaited us there and Falstone mounted in a way that could only be described as graceful.

“Let’s go ahead and nudge our mounts forward.”

I did so, feeling just a little stiff as the horse moved beneath me.

“Now pull back on the reins so that you can get a feel for how to make her stop.” He walked me through several other instructions and I appreciated the reminders.

“We’ll simply walk for a while today. Maybe try a trot after you’ve gotten a feel for it.”

I didn’t want to trot. I wanted to push this beautiful mare to a full gallop, to see what she could really do. But even if Falstone hadn’t already been watching me with suspicion, I knew I wasn’t ready for that yet. It had been a full nine years since I had sat a mount. And riding out pell-mell on my first time back in the saddle would be folly. So instead I settled in for a sedate walk.

The relief and freedom that I felt atop this lovely mare took me by surprise. I had known I would enjoy it; that was no surprise. But I hadn’t known that I would feel set free, my spirit lightened—it was a most welcome surprise.

It wasn’t until we were returning to the stables that Falstone brought up a subject other than riding. “Can I ask you something?”

I tensed, bracing myself for a personal question.

“It’s about Princess Marilee,” he clarified.

“Oh.” I kept my face forward. “Yes, you can ask, though I can’t guarantee an answer.”

“Does she still have nightmares?”

His question took me by surprise. “I forgot you knew about those.” For weeks after leaving Bridgefield, Marilee’s nightmares had been awful, often waking me in the night.

He gave a sad smile.

Those days had been such an intense mixture of light and dark as we left behind the home that had been both a prison and a sanctuary. “They were

frequent at first,” I finally answered. “But fortunately it’s been a long time since I’ve been aware of any.”

He nodded. “Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

“I’m a little surprised you would continue to worry about such things.”

He shrugged, and the timidity of the gesture was surprising. “It’s my job to protect people. With everyone I’ve been tasked with protecting before now, that’s been a straightforward assignment. But the princess’s situation is different. I can’t protect her from memories of her past, or from the phantoms her mind conjures.”

“What would it be like to have that magical power?” I mused. “I’d like to be free of my memories sometimes.”

“Would you?”

I caught his eye, realizing I’d said more than I’d intended. “Yes,” I said simply and turned forward, nudging my mount a little so that I could pull ahead and end the conversation.

Marilee insisted I become reacquainted with the saddle as quickly as possible, which meant I found myself in the company of Falstone on a daily basis over the next week.

“Why is it that you chose Falstone to be my instructor?” I asked, suspicious that it had a great deal to do with her need to pair me off with someone.

Her smile was radiant. “I just thought you two would enjoy one another’s company.”

Her lack of remorse over her blatant matchmaking made me sigh. “Falstone is a fine man, but you know I am not interested in any attachments.”

“Well, you can at least give the man a reprieve from the boredom of protecting me from nonexistent potential threats.”

I wanted to be bothered by her machinations, but it was difficult because Falstone as an instructor was actually quite charming. It was the oddest thing. When I had first encountered him all those months ago, my initial instinct was to be frightened, but then his determined aloofness had allowed me to be invisible. Then I’d seen him with the children, and then he’d spoken to me.

And now...I just wanted to know who he was, who he *truly* was.

Was he the firm and immovable guard, in control at all times? Was he this easygoing tutor, relaxed on a horse? The man who engaged in swordplay with children? Or was he the awkward man who had stood before me suggesting I was a distraction while seeing through to my soul?

When we returned to the stables after my fourth riding lesson, he helped me to dismount and there was a moment—just one small moment—when he paused before stepping away and my heart lurched just a bit.

He broke away and we went about brushing our horses, since Falstone was a proponent of caring for one's own animal instead of simply handing it off to a groom.

I fell into the task with ease. I was good at brushing things. My hair. Marilee's hair. Marilee's clothes. This horse.

"The children have asked about you."

"Pardon?" I asked, confused by the sudden conversation starter. I saw many of the children several times a week when I went to the stables to tell a story or two.

"The boys have been hoping for another chance to rescue a fair maiden."

I pinched my lips against a smile. "I'll have to see if I can find one."

He smiled at that.

It wasn't that I didn't want to take part in their rescue attempts. I wouldn't mind it at all, but I'd been able to keep my feet from taking me out into the yard ever since I realized just how much of me he could see. There were parts of my life that belonged to no one but me. History I needed to guard. Secrets that must be kept. And as I contemplated the importance of keeping those secrets, a question that had been burning a hole in my sanity finally broke free. "Why did you—" I hesitated, not certain I really wanted to open the topic again, but my curiosity and worry got the better of me. "Why did you think I had been hurt?"

He looked at me, obviously surprised by my choice of topic.

"Before," I clarified, worried he didn't know what I spoke of. "Two weeks ago, when you asked if I'd—"

"I remember," he said, his work uninterrupted by the conversation.

"Why? What made you ask that?" What had he seen in me that gave away my secret so easily?

His head tilted a little as he studied me. "It was mostly intuition, but it was also your voice and expression when you spoke of—was her name Anna?"

“Annabelle.”

“Yes, Annabelle. You were fond of her, perhaps even enjoyed the work there in Tethurn. But you ended up coming to work for Lord Rockwell, so there must have been some sort of catalyst.”

“Oh,” I said on a sigh.

“And you’re skittish. Not all the time, but whenever anyone new comes around—or any man, I should say. You shrink.”

Saints, he really did see everything.

“There’s usually a reason for such things,” he said gently.

I took a slow, stuttering breath. “Yes, there is.”

His eyes focused fully on my face then. I don’t think he had expected me to admit to it. I hardly believed I had done it myself. It had slipped out, and as I stood there trying to decide if I should move forward with an explanation or simply turn back to brushing my mount in the hope that he would allow the subject to drop, I sensed the way he studied me. He wanted to know. His investigative, protective, apparently brilliant mind wanted to know, but this time he was keeping his questions to himself. He shifted from one foot to the other but remained quiet, and it was almost funny to see him resisting the urge to question.

Most importantly, I appreciated that he didn’t pry or insist on an answer. He was leaving it up to me, and I decided it was likely better if I controlled the narrative of my life instead of letting him wonder or, heaven forbid, ask other people. “It’s not as interesting a story as you might think,” I said.

He came a little closer, fully prepared to listen.

I turned back to my mount, raising the brush and pulling it over the mare’s side in even strokes. “In fact, it might even be considered mundane. After all, what does it matter if a servant girl is not treated well? I wasn’t the first to find myself in such a situation, and I certainly won’t be the last. I suppose it just took me by surprise. One day everything seemed to be going well. My work wasn’t perfect. There was room for improvement certainly. But then...then things changed.” I drifted off, into the memories of that time. The pain and confusion.

“How did they change?” Falstone asked quietly.

“The butler. Brunson.”

“What about him?”

“He—“ I shook my head, still confused by the sudden turn my life had taken all those years ago. “He suddenly decided that all my work was

unsatisfactory, and he thought it best to try to correct my behavior with brute force.” My brush strokes became more aggressive as my story progressed.

“Brute force?”

“It started small. Twisting my arm. Shoving me back to my knees when the floor wasn’t clean enough. It didn’t truly worry me in the beginning. I would simply be more thorough, improve my work, and he’d have no reason to reprimand me. But no matter what I did...it didn’t matter how hard I tried, it was never good enough.” I sniffed against the memories. “Of course, it was difficult to improve my work when my hand didn’t work right or when one eye was swollen shut.” The horses snorted and shifted away from me.

Falstone’s hand was suddenly on top of mine, tugging the brush away. “How long did this go on?” His voice was calm but held an undercurrent of tension.

I didn’t turn around, couldn’t face him, though I could almost feel his heat at my back. “A month. Then I was awoken by Annabelle and the housekeeper in the middle of the night. They told me to pack my things. I thought for certain I was going to be turned out of the house with nothing. Instead I found out that Annabelle had worked her magic. She’d convinced the housekeeper that I needed saving. You see, no one else was ever around when he hurt me. He claimed my injuries were accidents—the result of my own clumsiness. But the housekeeper believed me. She believed Annabelle. So they put me in a carriage and sent me to work for Lord Rockwell with a glowing recommendation.” A miracle. That’s what that night had been. Like I’d been sprinkled in fairy dust and magicked away. A miracle.

“What of Annabelle and the other maids? Did they need protection as well?”

I shook my head. “It was only ever me. I asked the housekeeper the same thing. I worried for Annabelle. I worried for all of them. But she told me that Brunson had never acted that way toward anyone before. She had no explanation as to why he singled me out, but she said she couldn’t stand for it anymore, and she wasn’t willing to see if the situation would resolve itself.”

He looked utterly confused. “But that doesn’t make any sense.”

I nodded, understanding his confusion all too well. “I know, but I have no explanation, and I can only be grateful that the housekeeper and Annabelle

did what they did.”

“I’m...grateful you were able to leave that life.”

“As am I.” I looked down at my hands as I pinched the tips of my fingers.

“And Lord Rockwell? Did he terrorize you as well?”

I shook my head. “No. Lord Rockwell did not lower himself to dally with servants. He preferred women of class.” Another reason I was grateful to be a servant instead of the lady I was born to be. “He ignored me, which left me quite content so long as I stayed on Mrs. Braithwhite’s good side.” I spat her name.

“The housekeeper?”

“Yes.”

“I have heard tales of her.”

“No doubt.” She was a more than formidable woman. “The first several years here were not easy. Mrs. Braithwhite was often a cruel taskmaster, but I could accept her verbal barbs, and as I got older and more competent, she left me alone more and more. It was perfectly tolerable, and so much better than what I’d left behind.”

“And now?” he asked. “Is your position here more than just tolerable?”

I smiled and turned to look at him. “I’ve just returned from riding a horse for no other reason than that Her Highness wishes for my company. Believe me, my life is better now than I ever had the right to expect.”

5

Two days later, I went to meet Falstone at the stables.

“You’re early,” Pryce said as he led Falstone’s horse from a stall.

“I know. I wanted to say hello to your little ones.”

He smiled, tilting his head toward the doors at the other end of the building. “They’re out back,” he said.

I left the dim light of the stables and found Ansel and Lindy playing in the dirt of the paddock, the horses so familiar with their presence that they stepped around them with with no concern, even when Ansel raised up on his knees to declare, “I am the greatest warrior! And I will slay the dragon with nothing but my fists!”

I chuckled, which earned me their attention.

“Hi, Cecily,” Ansel threw over his shoulder before pummeling a straw animal into the ground with his fisted hands.

“Hello, mighty warrior Fransel.”

He turned to look at me, one side of his lip pulled up dramatically. “It’s Chansel,” he stated as though I were a fool to have forgotten.

“Of course, yes. My mistake.”

“And I’m Blindy,” Lindy reminded me. “But I’m not a warrior today. Today I’m just a queen.”

I managed to hold in my snort. “Ah. Well, the role of a queen may not be as noble as that of warrior, but we still need them.”

“And they wear pretty dresses.”

“Too true.”

They filled me in on their game and I watched the drama play out for a few minutes until I heard Falstone’s voice.

“Good luck in your military campaign, Chansel. And I have no doubt Queen Blindy will be the fairest at the ball,” I assured her before going inside to meet Falstone.

Soon enough, we rode out, just the two of us. My comfort on a horse was quickly returning, and I kept having to hold myself back.

“What is on your mind?” Falstone asked.

“Pardon?”

“You were concentrating on something.”

I tried to think of a quick lie that he wouldn’t be able to see through. Why was he always asking me questions? In fact... “Never mind about me. I want to know about you.”

“Me?” he asked.

“Yes, you. I’ve told you a great deal about myself, but you’ve hardly told me anything of you.”

He pulled back a little, perhaps not used to being the interrogated instead of the interrogator. “What would you like to know?”

“Where did you grow up?”

“Dalthia.”

“Do you miss it?”

“I suppose, in some ways, sometimes.”

“That is vague indeed.”

He chuckled. “I serve Her Royal Highness, the princess of Dalthia. As such, I suppose I consider this place to be simply an extension of my home. The princess tends to bring Dalthia with her wherever she goes.”

My smile was tinged with sadness. “It’s nice that you have a home.”

His gaze fixed on my face. “Do you not?”

I shook my head. “I have been removed, tossed out of, or escaped from every place I have ever lived. I think home requires some permanence.”

He considered that for a moment. “Do you think you could find that permanence in a person?”

I brightened at this idea. “Yes, I suppose. And by that criteria, I would consider Beatrice and Emeline to be my home.” I grinned.

“And when you marry?” he asked. “I suppose your home will be wherever your husband is.”

A chill rushed into my chest, making me brace against the cold that his suggestion summoned. I just shook my head.

His head tilted in confusion. “Why not?”

“I won’t marry.” Some might have considered my decision to be a refusal to grow up. A longing to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood. And in

some ways that was true. If growing up meant surrendering my will to another, then I wanted none of it.

“But why would—“

“And you cheated,” I cut him off. “You were supposed to be telling me about you. You grew up in Dalthia. What of your parents?” I asked, desperate for him to talk of himself. I couldn’t reveal any more of my thoughts right now. The mention of marriage left me feeling too fragile.

Falstone looked confused but acquiesced. “My mother loved me. We struggled, but she did the best she could. My father isn’t worth mentioning.”

“How did you come to be a member of the royal guard?” I asked, purposefully respecting his wish not to discuss his father.

“I grew up knowing that my father didn’t want me. Hadn’t wanted my mother. I was unwanted, a lost boy without a father. And because of that, I had something to prove. I set my sights on being a soldier and joining the palace guard. I trained hard every day starting when I was ten years old. Not just to prove that I didn’t need my father, but to claim my own place in the world, to be able to take care of my mother.”

“And you were able to do that.” My admiration grew. It was difficult not to like a man who wanted nothing more than to care for his mother.

“I was. We were never anything but poor, but at least we were not as desperately poor as we had been before. She married a few years ago.” He looked at me with a grin. I was happy to see that that news brought him joy. “So now that I’ve proven myself and my mother is taken care of, all that’s really left is to be the best at what I do.”

“And you are.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

I looked at him askance. “Suddenly modest?”

He gave me a cocky grin. “Are you saying I am arrogant?” he asked, and some of the teasing I’d seen him use on the children slipped into his voice and features.

“You were the one that called yourself arrogant,” I argued. “As for me, no, I wouldn’t call you arrogant, just...self-assured. You are, after all, the one who told me you had a gift for reading people.” I turned my face away. “And I’ve witnessed your talents myself. In fact, you’re trying to use them now.” I shifted in the saddle, trying to hide my discomfort.

“Yes, I am,” he admitted without shame.

“Why? Why use them on me?”

“You don’t think you might be an intriguing creature?”

Worry fluttered in my heart, but I managed to look him in the eye when I said, “I don’t want to be.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that.”

I looked away, hoping that wasn’t true. Intriguing meant I would stand out. Standing out meant I could more easily be found.

“Now,” Falstone said as he pulled his horse a little closer to mine, leaning in conspiratorially. “Are you finally going to show me what you’re capable of?” he challenged. “You galloped this horse yesterday like you were born to it.”

I laughed. “Perhaps I was born to it and I’ve simply forgotten my past life as a lady.” Better to tease about the truth than let him see through lies.

“That would actually answer many of my questions,” he muttered, and I decided to act as if I hadn’t heard.

“I will happily accept your challenge. I believe I’m ready.” And I was itching to *truly* ride.

“Good,” he said with a curve of his mouth. “Then go ahead. Think pretty thoughts, and perhaps you’ll feel what it’s like to fly.”

His reference to something I’d said during one of my stories caught me off guard, but the way he raised his eyebrows gave me all the encouragement I needed.

I let a grin slip over my mouth then urged my horse into a gallop, laughing as the breeze pulled at my hair and whipped past my skirts. I breathed deep, filling my lungs to capacity as I flew with the horse. I’d almost forgotten how exhilarating it could be. The air rushing past me, almost making me believe that it would lift me into the sky. The sheer power of the animal beneath me. The speed and the pounding of hooves. It was easy to forget that anyone was with me as I lost myself in the joy of it.

Falstone pulled up alongside me, grinning like a little boy as he bent over the neck of his mount, racing ahead.

We didn’t go far, but when we slowed our horses, we were both laughing. “You ride like you’re still eleven years old,” Falstone commented, his eyes sparkling with delight.

Nine, I corrected silently as I tilted my head back, letting the dappled sunlight dance across my face through the leaves overhead. That was the

last time I'd ridden free with my father racing beside me. "I suppose I've never quite grown up."

"Do we ever truly grow up?" he mused.

I looked back at him. "What do you mean?"

"I always thought I would feel old at some point, that I would feel markedly different in personality and temperament than I was as a child, but..." He shook his head and shrugged. "Maybe another reason I wanted to join the guard was so that I would never have to truly grow up. I could play at being a soldier my entire life. I'd never have to worry that I would have a family and then be tempted to abandon them like my father did me." His gaze was suddenly distant, like he'd let slip a private thought that wasn't meant to be spoken out loud.

"But you take your protection of Marilee so seriously," I reminded, trying to make what he'd just said and what I knew of him fit together. "Do you resent it?"

He smiled. "Not at all. I can do my job fully, sacrifice my life for her knowing that if I am killed, I won't be leaving behind anyone who relies on me. It would be a hero's death. A fitting end to an adventurous life."

His gaze drifted again and I realized his guard was down. For some reason, here with me, he was letting himself just be Falstone the man, instead of the soldier.

"You would be missed, certainly," I pointed out.

He shrugged off my words. "Perhaps a little, by a few. But a guard can be easily replaced." He turned to look at me. "A husband and father cannot."

I choked a little at his words. "Yes, that does make a difference..." I shoved down the lingering loss and betrayal and considered his reasoning. It was an intriguing principle by which to live one's life. "Even so, how is it that I've never seen that side of you until recently? The side that never wants to grow up? The side that plays make-believe with children? You were never like this before. At Bridgefield, you were never carefree, always serious."

He leaned forward, resting his forearm on the pommel of his saddle. "When Master Damian's brother was around, things *were* more serious. And during that time, Marilee was worried, constantly. To counteract her fear of Edmund, it was important that we all not only look confident and stalwart, but that we really took our jobs seriously. She needed that

reassurance.” He turned to look at me, a bit of sheepishness stealing over his features. “And it may seem strange, but I love playing that role.”

“Playing a role?” I asked, intrigued. “Is that how you see it?”

He shrugged. “I know it’s not a game. I know the threats are real. I am committed to keeping the princess safe. But at the same time, yes, I do see it as a role. A great acting game where I play the most formidable person in the room.” His cocky grin was back and it was clear he truly saw it that way. An adventure. A lark. A game.

“Do you suppose you’ll ever invite me into your game?”

He turned to me, eyes lighting with excitement. “Is that what you want?”

“Perhaps,” was the only honest answer I could give without revealing too much of my longing. And it was longing. I longed to know him more. To unearth all his facets. “Is that why no one calls you by your first name? You keep the real Porter hidden away behind a character?” Was I getting to know the real him, or a personality he put on?

He shook his head. “There is no ‘real’ Porter. It’s all just me. If anything, Falstone feels more like my name than Porter ever did. I’ve been called Falstone ever since I started training. I suppose it was my way of choosing who I would be.”

“So I should not start calling you Porter?”

“Please no,” he said with a shake of his head. “Porter is the name my father gave me.”

“Ah.” His words and the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know. “Falstone it is then.”

I thought a great deal (more than I should have) about what Falstone had said about not growing up. I’d certainly seen his playful side when it came to training the children, but playing games with children was a far cry from acting like a child himself.

Over the next week, though, that side of him became more obvious.

One morning I finished breakfast and returned to Marilee’s room, startling at the sight of Falstone standing at attention just outside the door. I put a hand to my heart. “You frightened me. What are you doing out here?”

He didn’t respond. In fact, he remained stock-still, feet apart, hands clasped behind his back, chin held high. I looked around, wondering what was going on to make him act so. When I saw nothing, I turned back to

him, catching just the slightest curl at one corner of his mouth before his expression turned to stone again.

My eyes narrowed. What game was he playing?

I shook my head and decided to go about my duties as normal.

When I left Her Highness's room a short while later, Falstone was no longer just outside the door. I figured he must have gone about his own work, which meant that he succeeded in startling me again when I walked down the corridor and found him in an alcove. Once again, he was standing at attention, his eyes straight ahead.

I set a hand on my hip and glared at him, watching to see if he would crack. He didn't.

"Is this what you meant when you talked of *playing* at being a soldier?"

He didn't answer or move, and after a few moments I felt foolish talking to this statue version of Falstone, so I moved on, delivering Marilee's soiled riding clothes to the laundress.

This time, as I traversed the corridors, I was determined not to be caught unawares. Falstone was playing a game, and I refused to be the loser even if I didn't understand the rules.

He was standing up against the wall on the servants' stairs as I climbed them. When I saw him I rolled my eyes, even as I fought against a smile and lost.

"You are an odd one," I said as I came to stand on the same step that he occupied, though the width of the step made it so that I barely fit. I planted my feet directly in front of him and crossed my arms. "You know, some of us have work to get done. We can't all go about playing games in the middle of the day."

Still nothing. So I scooted just a little closer. "I wonder what it would take to get you to flinch..." I purposely let my voice trail off, giving him a chance to come up with worst-case scenarios. "Perhaps I could tickle your nose with a feather," I suggested, then took another step closer.

His eye twitched.

"You're really not going to say anything?" I gave a dramatic sigh. "Very well." I reached toward his hip and grabbed the handle of his knife that was sheathed there.

His hand immediately went to cover my own, protecting his weapon from falling into the hands of a villainess. He looked down at me, his eyes narrowing. "That is cheating."

I couldn't help but grin. "How can it be cheating when I don't know the rules? I don't even know what game we are playing."

His smile was bigger than I'd ever seen and it almost knocked the wind out of me. "You won this round." He leaned down and we were suddenly very close to one another. "Until next time," he whispered, then gave me a salute and retreated down the stairs.

I returned to my responsibilities, much more cheerful than I had been that morning.

When I joined Marilee and the others for tea that afternoon, I had to ask. "Have any of you noticed Falstone playing a bit of a game today?"

Marilee's cup froze on its way to her mouth. Her brow arched in surprise. "Game? You mean with the children?"

"No, I mean here, inside the house. He keeps showing up, totally still, acting like a statue. It's quite funny, actually."

Beatrice looked at me, obviously confused. "I haven't seen him do anything like that."

"No one else noticed?" I asked, looking from Beatrice to Marilee and then Emeline.

Emeline just shook her head with a small smile.

"Perhaps Falstone is trying to entertain himself," Marilee suggested as she passed a morsel of food to Rogue who lay quietly at her feet. "After all, this quiet country life is much duller than we're all used to."

"Are you saying you are bored, Highness?" I teased.

She laughed, the sound dancing through the air. "Not in the least. I have a new husband who makes life interesting."

I let the subject drop but continued to think on it. Had today been a strange fluke? Falstone being silly just this once, and on the morrow, he would be back to his vigilant, too-knowing self?

I certainly hoped not.

6

I entered the library in search of a certain book that Marilee had asked me about—though it was difficult for me to truly think of this room as a library when I compared it to the library of the Dalthian palace. I'd only had occasion to visit that glorious room twice during my stay, but even the memory of it left me in awe. Sutton Manor's library was really more of a study. Cozy with a few chairs, but only one window. Fortunately, there was a set of doors that led out onto the veranda, which gave the room plenty of light when the weather allowed them to be open.

As I looked over the titles, I noticed the layer of dust that coated many of them and wondered if I should mention it to the upstairs maid. No. Best not to upset the staff by critiquing their work.

In my efforts to find the book Marilee had asked for, I ended up distracted by all the other volumes I encountered. I wondered if I would have had occasion to read any of them if my life had turned out differently. If my father hadn't sought to usurp the duke, if I hadn't left my upbringing behind to go into service, would I have turned into an avid book reader like Princess Ariella? Would I have discovered a talent for painting like Princess Lorraina or fallen in love with dancing as Marilee had?

It didn't really matter, I supposed.

The sound of music suddenly started up behind me. My heart jumped and I whirled around to discover Falstone draped in one of the cozy chairs, a small wooden flute at his mouth.

How had he gotten there without me hearing his entrance? Had I been that distracted? Or was he simply so adept at moving about stealthily that he'd been utterly quiet?

I studied him in startled confusion as my heart recovered from the small scare. "What are you doing in here?" I asked.

The sound paused as he grinned and answered. "I'm playing a song for you. I would have thought that was obvious." He brought the instrument

back to his mouth.

I pursed my lips and narrowed my eyes, utterly bewildered. "I have never known anyone so changeable."

He raised his eyebrows at me to acknowledge my comment but continued playing.

I could have turned my back on him and resumed my search. Instead I crossed the room and sat on the table in front of the chair he occupied. If he was going to sit here and perform, then he would have to accept me as his rapt audience.

It was obvious that Falstone was comfortable with the instrument. He might have been playing a popular tune, but I had the feeling that it was a melody of his own, perhaps one he was making up as he went.

His hair was thick, light brown with even lighter streaks running through it. He had deep-set eyes shadowed by thick brows. His eyes were closed now, but I knew they were dark. Brown perhaps, or maybe tending toward gray.

His song suddenly stopped and he looked right at me. They were brown. His eyes were deep brown at the center and lighter toward the edges.

I dropped my gaze, suddenly intimidated by this chameleon.

"You study me," he said. "Why?"

As if I am the one being strange right now. I looked back up at him, lifting my chin so I could feign confidence. "Why are you serenading me in a library?"

"Can't a friend play a tune without their motives being questioned?" His look of innocence didn't fool me.

"You question everyone's motives."

"True."

"Then why can't I?" I challenged.

He sat up and leaned forward, bringing his face closer to mine than I was comfortable with. "I just wanted to see you smile. That's all."

I blinked. "Do I not smile enough?"

"When you're with Marilee and the other women, you do. Otherwise, they're quite rare." His eyes swept over my face, making my neck grow hot. "And I like earning them."

A smile almost curved my lips then, but my confusion squashed it before it could fully materialize. I was uncomfortable with Falstone having the

upper hand in our conversations, so I decided to fire back a question of my own. “Speaking of being changeable—”

He grinned at that description.

“Why wouldn’t you look at me before?”

His grin dropped from his lips and I knew I was on to something. “I looked at you,” he argued without conviction.

I gave him a disbelieving tilt of my head. “You glanced at me, the same way you looked at the furniture. All the time we were at Bridgefield, and most of the time we were in Dalthia...” I let the accusation linger.

His eyes fell to the floor.

I waited, hoping he would answer my question without further prompting. Instead, he put the flute back to his lips. I reached out, covering his fingers with my own where they held the instrument. He finally looked up at me again.

“You avoided looking at me then much like you are doing now. What changed?”

His gaze was so intense that I almost regretted forcing the question. Then his eyes fell to my mouth and he finally answered. “I told you. You were a distraction.” He swallowed. “Anytime I looked at you, I had to fight to look away again. For someone whose job it is to be watchful...” He scooted forward just a little and I couldn’t help my swift intake of breath. His gaze finally returned to my eyes. “You were a distraction I could not afford.”

When he leaned in just a little more, I broke the gaze he’d caught me in and stood abruptly, looking about the room for something else to focus on.

There. On the corner table. The book Marilee had asked for.

“There it is.” I crossed to it, picking it up and hugging it to my chest. “The princess asked for this. I should get it to her.” I tried to give him a parting smile as I hurried from the room, but it was forced and we both knew it. “Good day, Falstone.”

“Good day, Cecily.”

I was starting to like Falstone.

Which was unacceptable. I didn’t want to like him, certainly not any more than I did now. If I allowed myself to care for him, then I would have to trust him.

And I *did* trust him. Sort of. In certain situations. But I could not trust him with everything. I couldn’t trust anyone with everything. Some truths

belonged to me alone.

So when he appeared again in the hallway a few days later—still as a statue, but with his hands fisted firmly on the hilt of his knife at one hip and his sword at the other—I only paused for a moment before continuing on.

I *wanted* to play the game, but I couldn't. Not when I was so unsure of myself and my feelings. Not when I was committed to the life I'd chosen. Alone.

The following day, I went riding with Marilee. Sir James had to stay behind to meet a man who was looking for a mount, so it was only me, Marilee and Falstone. He was deeply committed to his role as soldier as we rode. That was good. It was as it should be. Marilee's safety was of paramount importance, and our almost-friendship was not a good idea, especially if I was still the distraction that Falstone claimed I used to be. So I did my best to be a good companion to Marilee and just enjoy the ride.

Marilee managed to maneuver ahead of both of us, leaving my horse to walk alongside Falstone's.

"You said you wanted to play the game," he said out of nowhere.

"What?" I asked, confused. "What game?"

"I confessed something about myself. Something quite personal, in fact. I admitted that I like to see myself as a character. I enjoy playing a role," he said in clipped tones, rehashing our former conversation. "You asked if I would ever invite you to play the game."

I looked away, embarrassed that I had been so bold that day. "Yes, I did."

"So I did. I tried to get you to play the game." Frustration rang through his voice. "And you seemed happy about it. At first."

I had been. I'd been more than happy. It had been thrilling. He'd pulled me in and made me want more silliness, more excitement, more of the energy that I felt when we were together. But I couldn't give him more. I couldn't give him everything, and he'd been quite clear about not wanting entanglements. He didn't want a wife and family. He wanted to jump into adventure and risk his life without any ties.

And I? I wanted to live my life according to my own decisions, my own wants and needs. I didn't want anyone to dictate the terms of my living.

But how could I tell him any of that? Any explanation I tried to put into words would make it sound as though I thought our little game would inevitably lead to marriage. And of course that wasn't true, but at the same time...it could be. The way I wanted to be close to him, and get to know

him, all of that could so easily lead to me wanting more. And that *more* felt unsafe and unsure.

And dangerous.

"I fear..." I started, desperate for words to explain. "I fear that playing these silly games will end with us growing up too fast."

"I don't know what that means," he said in typical blunt Falstone fashion.

I just shrugged. "It's the only way I can think to explain it."

We rode on for several tense moments. "I enjoyed playing games with you," he said.

His admission poked at my heart, but it also made me see things more clearly. "As did I. But what if it starts to feel like it's not a game?" I turned to look at him, remembering all too well the way he had leaned in when we were in the library. "What if that leads to either of us toying with the other?" It was the most honest concern I could voice without laying my heart out in the open.

"I do not intend to toy with you."

I shrugged. "Intention isn't everything."

His shoulders fell, and I think he understood because he didn't argue anymore. We continued on in silence, only speaking with Marilee and not each other.

Upon our return, I could hear Rogue barking. He was chasing Ansel and Lindy around the yard, dutifully keeping watch over them as he awaited Her Highness's return. Sir James was still with the buyer. I had become accustomed to the assortment of strangers that came to Sutton Manor, people seeking to buy a horse from Sir James's excellent stock. Men seeking advice on the best sort of mount for their child or their wife.

So we pulled our horses into the yard as usual. I dismounted, expecting that Sir James would call his wife over, as he was usually eager to introduce her to all his associates, and I would continue on into the stables to brush down my horse.

"Lady Wendolyn!"

My chest constricted. The sound of *that* voice calling *that* name soaked me in cold dread.

My head snapped up, following the sound of my real name being called.

I hadn't been Wendolyn since I left home. And no one had called me *Lady* anything for nine years. The name was supposed to be behind me. So when I looked toward the voice and saw the man who had called to me—

the man I had run from, the man I feared above all others—I froze, my chest and fingers going numb at the sight of Captain Huckley.

My betrothed.

He stood just outside the stables, tall and confident, his clothing just so, his ever-present watch chain dangling from his vest pocket. His face was blanketed in shock and confusion.

Then that confusion morphed to anger...and then triumph.

“Saints, save me.” The prayer fell from my lips as my heart seemed to collapse in on itself.

I wanted to run, to hide, but I was trapped inside a body that refused to move, and instead I just stood there, watching the approach of the man I feared most. The one person who could tear my whole world apart.

I was only barely aware of Princess Marilee's hand pressing on my arm, and her voice sounded far away as she asked, "Cecily? Cecily, are you all right?"

I was not all right, because Captain Huckley was walking ever closer; he was almost upon me, almost close enough to take hold of my arm and force me into his carriage, and that carriage would take me—

Falstone stepped into my line of vision.

"Halt, sir," he said with calm authority, one hand held out, palm forward to stay Captain Huckley's advance, the other hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

I knew he was only protecting Marilee, but it felt like he was doing it for me as well.

Huckley stopped, though his eyes stayed fixed on me, as though he couldn't be bothered to acknowledge a mere guard. "You are alive." It was an accusation.

Rogue growled from his position at Marilee's side. He'd always been a good judge of character.

My throat felt swollen shut, my voice nowhere to be found. The captain looked older, but he was still handsome and distinguished. A beautiful mask to hide a putrid soul.

Sir James approached Captain Huckley, looking more curious than wary. "Marilee, this is Captain Huckley. He is in need of a good mount. Captain Huckley, may I introduce my wife, Her Royal Highness, Princess Marilee of Dalthia."

For the first time, Huckley was forced to look away from me so that he could properly greet Her Highness. A sickly sweet expression came over his face as he put on his mask of polite gentility. "Princess, it is a pleasure. I apologize for my rudeness. I was only surprised to see Lady Wendolyn after

so many years.” He turned his eyes back to me and I fought the urge to step back, even with Falstone still standing between us.

“Oh.” Marilee looked to me and then back to Huckley. “You mean Cecily, my maid?”

“Maid?” He barked out a derisive laugh before fixing Marilee with a condescending smile filled with humor. “Begging your pardon, Princess, but she is no more of a commoner than you are. And her name is certainly not Cecily.”

Marilee’s eyelids fluttered and her brow jumped just a little, but that was the only sign of surprise that she allowed to show. I had told her of my birth, but I’d also told her that my family had fallen out of favor with society when I was only nine. No doubt she was surprised to have Captain Huckley claiming my acquaintance. Still, she did not waver in the slightest. Instead, she drew herself up, setting aside her friendly demeanor and slipping into her authoritative princess bearing instead. “Well, it was a pleasure to meet you. If you’ll excuse me, my companion and I have some things to see to. We’ll leave you two to conduct your business. Come, Cecily.” She turned and strode away with confidence, and I wasted no time following after her.

I could feel Falstone’s comforting presence at my back as we made our way into the house. Normally he would have stayed downstairs, but today he followed us all the way to Marilee’s door, leaving the tending of the horses to the grooms.

Once the princess and I were inside her chambers, my mind raced so fast that I could only stand there.

Captain Huckley had found me.

Now what?

Would he seek to reclaim me?

Had he already found another helpless female to enslave? Had she died too?

And if he was wanting another wife? Would he turn his nose up at what I had become and call himself lucky? I could hope, but I thought it unlikely.

“Cecily.”

I pulled myself out of the pit of worry and uncertainty that I was wallowing in and focused on Marilee. She had removed her own hat and gloves but still wore her riding clothes.

“I apologize, Princess. Let me help you.” I busied myself with helping her to change and she let the silence rest, but only for a few moments.

“Who was that man?” she finally asked as she stepped out of her riding skirt.

“I...” I couldn’t lie.

“You walked away from your old life, so seeing anyone from your past would be a surprise, but you didn’t look merely surprised. You looked frightened.”

I avoided her eyes as I laid down her skirt and picked up one of her favorite dresses. It was robin-egg blue with cream trim. I turned to her and held it down low so that she could step into it. “That was a long time ago.”

“I didn’t realize you had been out in society before going into service.” It wasn’t an accusation, but a gentle nudge to confide in her.

I took a deep breath, resigned to telling Marilee all she wanted to know. “My uncle liked people to think I was loved by him, and he was eager for me to find a husband who would take me off his hands,” I answered as she slipped her arms into the sleeves of her dress.

“Your uncle? Are your parents not living?”

“They were both living the last time I saw them.”

“When was that?”

“I last saw my father more than fifteen years ago, as he was being hauled off to prison. I assume he is still there—that is, if he hasn’t been executed for his crimes. The last time I saw my mother was the day she sent me off to marry Captain Huckley.”

She was quiet for a moment, and I focused on the shushing noise that the ties made as I threaded them through the holes in her gown. “Are you married, Cecily?”

I shook my head, grateful that the answer was a resounding no. “I never made it to his home.”

“Why not?”

“Because I did not want to.”

“What is wrong with him?” she asked, her voice still calm and quiet, a foil to my racing heart and panicked movements. “I realize he is a good deal older, but it must be more than that.”

More? Yes, there was more. “His first wife.” I swallowed and my hands shook. “She died.”

“Spouses sometimes do.” Her voice was heavy with emotion, though I couldn’t tell which ones. The death of Marilee’s first husband had set her free.

“Yes, they do sometimes.” I licked my lips, my mouth dry. “But then his second wife died.”

This time it took her longer to respond. “An unfortunate coincidence?”

I finished her ties and then stepped back. “He had a third wife as well.”

She turned to look at me, horror layered over compassion on her face.

“Oh, Cecily.”

I gave a little shrug, determined not to become overly emotional.

“Your mother knew this and still agreed to the marriage?”

I nodded.

“Why?”

“My mother was beholden to my uncle. My uncle needed the money. Captain Huckleby offered it.”

“But surely there were other options. To marry you to a man who had three dead wives...”

I lifted a shoulder. “I was a drain on his resources.”

She just shook her head, her eyes misting. “I’m so sorry, Cecily.” She reached out and hugged me. “You could have told me, you know.”

“I know.” And I did. “But I wanted to leave that behind.”

Marilee left to go downstairs, and I stayed to straighten the room. I gathered her hat and gloves, opening the wardrobe to put them away with shaking hands.

“Who is he, Cecily?”

Somehow, Falstone’s abrupt words didn’t startle me; they just made me pause, then I slowly closed the wardrobe doors and turned to meet his eyes.

“Why aren’t you with Her Highness?”

“She told me to stay with you. Who is he?”

“I don’t—”

“You wouldn’t have reacted that way if you didn’t know him,” he said before I could finish my lie.

Fine. The truth, then. “I was barely more than a child the last time I saw him.”

“He doesn’t look at you like you’re a child now.”

I went to straighten the bed which didn't need straightening. "It would be odd if he did, since I am not a child now."

"You know what I mean, *Lady Wendolyn*."

I gave an exhausted sigh as I tugged at the coverlet. "I would greatly appreciate it if you would continue to call me Cecily."

"Is that your name?"

I paused, a pillow clutched in my hands. "My full name is Wendolyn Cecilia Stoffard, so I chose to go by Cecily."

"*Lady Cecily*?"

"No." I whirled to look at him. "Just plain, common Cecily. Cecily who has worked for her position. Cecily who values the life she has now—the *freedom*." I could hear the cracks in my voice where it threatened to break along with the rest of me.

He studied me, his eyes soft. "So tell me about the life you had before."

"What about it?" Why did he need to know the details of a life I had chosen to run from?

"I'm guessing you rode horses, for one. You took to riding much too quickly for a beginner."

"Yes." That was an easy admission. There wouldn't be many of those.

His look intensified, as though waiting for me to continue, but I didn't. "I wish you would have told me that," he finally said.

A self-deprecating laugh puffed past my lips. "What would that accomplish?"

"It would have been the truth. And I want to know the truth about you."

We stood, staring at each other for several moments as I resigned myself to the fact that from this day forward, my life would be much more complicated. Then I took a breath and did as he asked. "The truth," I began, my voice shaking. "The truth is that I was the daughter of a wealthy nobleman who I *thought* adored me. Then I was the destitute daughter of a treasonous nobleman. Then I was the niece of a man who did not want me. Then I was the fiancée of a man who took one look at me and decided that I was pretty enough, unique enough, to add to his *collection* of wives." I tried to keep my tone level, even as I watched Falstone's face twist into a look I did not recognize. "And then I chose to become no one. And being no one was difficult and sometimes terrifying, but it was better than being the pretty, *dead* wife of Captain Huckleby."

He didn't say anything. Apparently, I had shocked him into silence.

“So yes, when I was a nobleman’s daughter, I rode horses. And I loved it. And I missed it when I left that life. But I would give that up one thousand times in exchange for the life I have now.” Not just because I was free of a terrifying marriage, but because I had been able to do some good. When Princess Marilee married Damian, I had been able to help her. I was there to pull her through, alongside Emeline and Beatrice. “I wouldn’t have what I have now if I had remained who I was.”

“Do you feel you are so very different now?” He studied me as if he wished to see the me I used to be.

“I certainly hope so.” I didn’t wish to be that quaking child, waiting for fate to claim her. I was happy with who I’d become. And I did not appreciate my old life coming back to haunt me.

“What did you mean?” Falstone asked. “When you said you would be his pretty, *dead* wife?”

I gave a little shrug. “It’s a reasonable assumption since each of his other three wives is dead.”

He looked flummoxed and angry. “Was there no investigation?” he demanded. “No inquiry into the cause?”

“The first died in childbirth. No one questioned it. The second was a carriage accident. The third was already frail when he married her. He claimed illness took her less than a year later.”

“And people just accepted that?”

“No. Everyone was suspicious, but there was no proving anything. When his second wife died, he was at sea, captaining one of his vessels. And he enjoys playing the role of a grieving widower. Perhaps he’s even acquired a fourth dead wife by now.”

So many emotions worked over his face and through his eyes as he thought through my words, the implications, the injustice that would no doubt chafe against his sense of honor. “And your father? You say he committed treason.”

I shrugged. “I assume it’s true. I’ve never heard anyone refute it.”

“Then it was your uncle who agreed to this?”

“Yes. He was anxious to be rid of me, since everyone considered my father to be a traitor to Winberg.”

“So, you were...sold? To this captain?”

“Uncle called it a betrothal, but yes.” *You’ll have to grow up quickly*, my mother had been fond of saying. I had hated that phrase and what it meant.

Falstone shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to keep his agitation from showing. "How old?"

My brow furrowed at the odd question. "Who?"

"You. How old were you when you were to marry him?"

"Sixteen."

"And he?"

"Twenty years my senior."

"But you didn't marry him?"

I shook my head. "Thankfully, no. I told you about Annabelle, the girl who taught me how to be a maid."

His brow furrowed. "Yes?"

"I didn't meet her in Tethurn. We became well acquainted when she was working for my uncle. After I was told of the betrothal, she helped me come up with a plan to leave. A possible means of freedom, no matter how small the hope. She was sent with me when I was to go to Captain Huckley. We bribed the coachman, gave him all the money I had managed to hide away so that he would leave us in Tethurn instead of taking us on to Huckley's residence. Annabelle and I both escaped my uncle's house."

"And you escaped Captain Huckley?"

"Yes." Fear welled in my heart as tears welled in my eyes. "And now he is back."

"He will not have you."

I looked away, unable to bear the surety of his gaze when I felt hopelessness creeping in. I dug my thumb into the palm of my other hand, trying to focus on the discomfort instead of my writhing heart.

"Cecily." I hadn't realized Falstone had moved closer until he took my hands in his, prying them apart and clutching them each in one of his own.

I finally looked up at him, and this time I let myself believe the surety. I let myself believe in him, in the fire his gaze held. I believed in his calm. His strength. His loyalty.

"He will not have you," he said again.

I closed my eyes and did my best to breathe in the hope he offered while the warmth of his hands around mine eased an ache deep in my heart.

A knock sounded on the open door.

Falstone and I stepped apart, our hands dropping away as we turned to see a maid in the doorway. "Sir James has asked that you both come down to the drawing room," she said, leaving as soon as her message had been

delivered, knowing that we would obey the summons without any further prompting.

I fisted my hands in the sides of my skirt, spared one glance at Falstone, and then walked out into the corridor.

8

Being escorted to a room where an encounter with Huckley was inevitable reminded me of the afternoon sailing excursion that Captain Huckley had hosted aboard his largest ship when I was fifteen.

He'd sailed into the Norsing port, unloaded his goods, and then arranged the little outing before he was to return to his home on the coast of the Alayan Sea.

I hadn't wanted to go. I'd only just turned fifteen and knew all too well about the agreement that existed between Captain Huckley and my uncle. However, my attendance was not optional. My uncle had ordered Annabelle to arrange my dark auburn hair with jeweled pins, and he even splurged on the purchase of a new gown for me, though I wondered at his posturing. The captain knew our financial situation and wanted me anyway. Perhaps Uncle Horace feared that Huckley would change his mind.

If only that were true.

Though there were several other families in attendance, stepping onto that ship for the first time felt like a door was slamming behind me—my fate being sealed. Captain Huckley greeted us. My mother stood quietly at my shoulder as my aunt and uncle fawned and preened, *ever* so grateful for the invitation. They didn't seem to notice that the captain practically brushed them aside in order to take my hand and bow over it.

It was a clear, beautiful day. The sun was bright, the wind brisk. The animated voices around me spoke in jovial tones, punctuated by laughter here and there. Yet it was one of the darkest days of my life thus far. The air was suffocating. The wind tried to knock me over. Everyone was too loud while my own voice was too silent. I stood at the railing of the ship with the other guests, but instead of leaning out to feel the breeze and watch the waves, I simply stood, because it was all I could do to keep myself upright. Captain Huckley did not spend the entirety of the voyage at my side. Instead he just came back, again and again. Handing me another glass of

refreshment, resting a hand on my back, teasing me until I was forced to smile so that he would be satisfied and go away.

Trapped on that ship, I felt as if I were fading away, like if I remained I might cease to exist altogether.

I knew my identity, but I feared that would be stolen from me the moment I became the wife of Captain Huckley.

So I made a desperate wish. I pled with the ocean, the sun, moon and stars. I pled with the clouds and the wind. I threw my wishes out into the world, hoping that some benevolent being might grant them.

My wish was that I would never reach my sixteenth birthday, that I would never grow up.

That I would never marry.

I entered the drawing room, Falstone following behind at a distance, keeping himself in a protective position.

The moment I entered, I saw Captain Huckley there, standing before the fire, looking pleased with the situation. His eyes lit up at my entrance.

“Wendolyn, darling.”

My stomach rolled.

“Cecily.” Marilee addressed me from her spot perched on a broad-backed chair, looking like the princess she was. “Captain Huckley insists he has something you need to hear.” She turned to look at the captain, impatience written on her face. “Go ahead, Captain.”

“I simply thought Lady Wendolyn would wish to hear news of her family,” he said as he took me in with calculating eyes.

I swallowed down the terror that his presence provoked. “What of them?” I asked, wanting him to just get to the point.

His eyes roved over me for several moments before he turned to Marilee. “Your Highness, if you please, I would like to have a private moment with Lady Wendolyn.”

Princess Marilee looked as though she was going to flatly refuse, but Sir James put a hand on her arm and she turned to look at him. They had a silent conversation before she turned back, looking unhappy but resigned.

“We will give you your privacy, but my guard stays.”

I shot Falstone a sidelong glance and saw his hand clench where it rested on the hilt of his sword.

Captain Huckley let a disarming smile curve his mouth. “Surely there is no need for that,” he cajoled.

Marilee lifted her chin. “I do not know you, Captain Huckley. And if you think I would leave Cecily with you, alone and unprotected, then you have gravely miscalculated my character.”

He pulled his chin back, surprised at Marilee’s defense of me. “She is only a maid,” he said through his shock.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “She is not *only* anything. You have ten minutes.” She gave my hand a squeeze before leaving the room on Sir James’s arm.

As soon as the door shut, Captain Huckley’s dark eyes settled on me in a way that made me want to shiver from the cold despite the heat of my fear. I swallowed and forced my voice to work. “What news of my family?”

He grinned and I couldn’t understand why, and that worried me. “Thanks to the arrangement they entered into with me, they’ve been living quite well the last few years.”

I blinked in surprise. “Living well?”

“You didn’t know?” He seemed much too happy about that. “Did you not read the contract? It was quite simple. When the marriage was complete, your uncle would receive a hefty sum.”

“I already knew that.” But I had no idea what it had to do with now since the marriage never happened.

“And of course, your mother,” he continued, seeming to revel in the storytelling. “You see, your mother was reluctant to let you go. She wanted some sort of reassurance that I was invested in your future, and of course your uncle knew the worth of a pretty face. So the contract stipulated that not only would I take care of you, but I would also pad the pockets of your uncle and your mother. It was all signed and agreed to beforehand.”

“But the terms of the contract were never carried out.”

“Perhaps not by you, thanks to your wily subterfuge. But even when you disappeared and we all believed you had died, I kept my end of the bargain. I am a man of my word, you realize. Your uncle and all his household have been living well thanks to my generosity. After all, I did feel some responsibility for your demise and thought it was the least I could do to soften the blow. No doubt they will rejoice at the news of your health and happiness.” The gleam in his eyes made my skin crawl, as did the way the

corners of his mouth curled up. “However, I must insist that we proceed with the original terms that were agreed upon. I’ve waited long enough.”

I stumbled back a step as his bold meaning hit me. “You mean marriage?” I asked in a horrified whisper.

“Of course.”

“No.” The word was automatic, brought up from the very depth of my soul to declare my refusal.

“No?” He asked with a quirk of his brow.

“No,” I reiterated. “I did not have a choice before. But I believe I am capable of making my own choice now. And though you may find it strange that I would choose this life, there is nothing in the world that would convince me to choose you.”

His face settled into a frown, almost a pout. “I am very sorry to hear that.”

I swallowed, praying that would be the end of it.

“I’m certain your uncle will be disappointed.”

I scoffed to myself. My uncle wouldn’t care one way or the other.

He appeared to think for a moment and then gave a quick nod. “I will contact the magistrate and see what I can do about reclaiming the funds that your family accepted under false pretenses.”

My jaw went slack and I felt the blood drain from my face. “What?”

“You refuse to fulfill the contract your uncle entered into,” he said with a shrug of one shoulder, as if it were of little consequence. “Therefore it is only fair that I seek to take back what is rightfully mine. Now, in all likelihood, your uncle will be able to work out some sort of arrangement. If he doesn’t have the money, surely there is some property he could hand over. However, your mother...”

“What about her?”

He pulled out his pocket watch, giving it a smug glance before putting it away again. The gesture was familiar. That watch was a constant fixture on his person. He tracked time the way a farmer tracked the seasons. He claimed his merchant business was successful due to his diligent punctuality. “I imagine your uncle will no longer see the virtue of supporting her once I’ve stripped them of their assets and dragged them all through the mud...because of you.”

I tried to gulp down my emotions, but my lungs fought for air as I tried to adjust to my new reality. How could I be back in this position? Again? I

could feel his hooks sinking into me.

I had to fight this. I had to convince him that he didn't need me or want me. "Why did you give him the money in the first place?" I asked, desperation leaching the strength from my voice. "We had not married. You owed him nothing." I had no way of knowing if that was strictly true, having not been allowed to read the agreement, but it stood to reason.

Captain Huckley gave what I supposed was meant to be a long-suffering sigh. "Unfortunately, the terrible losses that I have suffered with my other wives have fed the rumor mill and left me with a somewhat unsavory reputation, one I must constantly strive to combat."

Murderer of wives was only a *somewhat unsavory* reputation?

"After my dear Lilianna passed on, I longed for a worthy companion for years before I met you. I imagined you as my angel. You would have been a boon to my tattered heart. You can imagine my devastation when you did not arrive at my home at the appointed time. Your family thought you had been killed, but I was not convinced. I searched for you. I questioned everyone. I traveled the road leading from your home to mine time and time again."

I tried to keep my breathing even, but it was a struggle. Having this man confirm that he had searched for me so obsessively reaffirmed all my paranoia, all my fear.

"And then," he continued, his face still twisted in the imitation of sorrow. "When I discovered you in Tethurn—"

My world tilted, lurching out of place.

"When I realized you had accepted the position of a maid, that you had debased yourself so much..."

My airway felt shrunken as I desperately tried to pull in a breath. *He'd known I was in Tethurn??*

"I considered coming to steal you away from there, to save you from such humiliation. But in the end, my pride got the better of me. I did not want to force myself on you. I wanted you to choose me for yourself."

I couldn't make his words make sense. He'd found me, years ago when I'd been in Tethurn, and yet he'd left me alone? It didn't make sense. If he'd been willing to leave me be then, why was he trying to reclaim me now?

"I felt it was best to nudge you in the right direction. Persuasion works so much better than force. So I arranged with Brunson to make your work less

enjoyable in the hopes that you would see your error and return to me willingly. He was more than happy to take the money.”

The fact that my legs were still able to support me was astonishing. My body was weak with shock. Brunson. The Butler who had tormented me. Hurt me. He’d done so because of Captain Huckley. Every bruise, every swollen lip had been paid for by my betrothed.

He continued, almost seeming to enjoy telling his tale, expounding on his own depravity. “I was devastated when Brunson told me you’d disappeared. I’d been so close to having you back, and you slipped through my fingers. Brunson couldn’t explain how you’d done it. I looked for you—for quite some time—but then I had no choice but to accept that you truly were gone. Likely dead on the side of the road somewhere because you’d been too stubborn to come home to me.”

He took a step toward me and I didn’t even have the energy to step back. He rested a hand on his chest and put on a pitiful expression. “Your loss devastated me, and I knew your family was suffering just as acutely.” His playacting was disgusting because it was so good. He looked grieved. He looked lovestruck. “So once I’d accepted your fate, I did all I could to comfort them. I had no wish to act heartlessly where they were concerned. Honoring our agreement despite your loss seemed the very least I could do.”

He’d paid my family? Out of the goodness of his heart? No. There was nothing good about his black heart. Uncle Horace had likely coerced the money out of him.

“And so, my dear, those are the facts. A contract was signed. An agreement must be honored.” He had the audacity to look as though he were sympathetic.

“It is not my fault you were foolish enough to give my uncle money in return for nothing.” In fact, I almost could have been proud of Uncle Horace for getting the upper hand if the consequences weren’t now falling on my head. As it was, I could only resent him more. He’d left me to face the impossible choice of saving my mother from destitution or saving myself from a life of misery.

Why, oh why did Captain Huckley have to come here? Why did he have to recognize me?

“It was not for nothing,” he argued, puffing himself up. “It was for honor. I’d signed a contract and I abided by it. And now, so must you. Else your

uncle's livelihood and your mother's home hang in the balance. I can return to Norsing by myself and inform them that they are ruined because you refuse to honor the deal that they struck, or—"

"It was your choice to give them the money after I was gone. That is your error, not theirs." My voice screeched in desperation, trying to find a way out.

"But was it?"

"Was it what?"

His eyes narrowed. "Was it my error? Or was I deceived and swindled? Has your mother known this whole time that you were living? Is she the one who sent you to Tethurn? That would be a clever ruse indeed."

"We did no such thing. My mother knew nothing of my plans."

"So you say, but how am I supposed to trust the word of a woman who would abandon her family and her future husband without a word?" He raised an eyebrow at me, his gaze maddeningly calm.

"Why would you want a wife whom you cannot trust?"

The smile that slid over his mouth was horrifying. It was triumphant and eager. "Trust will not be an issue once we are married."

I could not fathom what he meant and I didn't want to, because the danger in his words rang loud and clear. I was speechless, left utterly powerless by this wretched human being.

"So." He clapped his hands together, enjoying this twisted game of his. "I can return to Norsing, let the truth of your whereabouts be known, and seek justice for the compensation they took under false circumstances. Or..." He paused. "We can return together and fulfill the marriage contract. Your mother can join us in celebrating our happy marriage as well as the return of her daughter."

My heart was twisting, contorting in agony as his words settled over me like a burial shroud. I couldn't breathe. I was frozen like some marble statue, standing before a man with a bludgeon.

"You must come with me, Wendolyn, darling. It's what must be done." He stepped closer again, making my vision blur and the air grow thin.

"You forget, sir."

Falstone's words startled me as they rang out clear and strong behind me. I turned my eyes to him, having forgotten he was there, and suddenly I could breathe a little easier. He stood tall and proud, but not quite calm. Though he appeared at ease, there was a dangerous glint in his eye.

He spared me only a glance before fixing the steel of his gaze on Captain Huckley. "Cecily is under the employ of Princess Marilee. You cannot demand she leave with you. You'll need to discuss any such scenario with Her Highness."

"Or I could take her right now." Captain Huckley spat in contempt, and though he had not even made a move toward me, Falstone pulled his sword so quickly and unexpectedly that I flinched.

"Try," he said, his voice ice. "Try and I will enjoy stopping you."

Captain Huckley grinned, but it was filled with malice. "I was only jesting, soldier. Stand down."

"I don't take orders from you."

Captain Huckley took several moments to look Falstone over, and probably to plan his next move. "We are not enemies, you know," his voice was suddenly pleasant, which was more disconcerting than his threats. "I appreciate your commitment to protecting my Wendolyn."

I cringed as his words claimed me.

"She is not yours," Falstone pointed out.

"Not yet. But she is most precious to me," he said as he put a hand over his heart. I wanted to gag.

Falstone scoffed as he slid his sword back into its scabbard. "You must have forgotten that I've been standing here as you threatened her."

Captain Huckley held up a hand. "You misunderstood. I was only laying out the facts as they are."

Falstone's only response was a further look of disdain.

"You don't have to believe me," the captain said with a wave. "But I will take you up on your suggestion. I'm certain when I explain the situation to Her Highness and Sir James, they will understand." He turned his attention back to me. "Not to worry, my dear." He took a step toward me, reaching out a hand.

"Do not touch her if you value the use of your hand," Falstone spoke with dangerous calm.

Captain Huckley dropped his hand and glared at Falstone before smoothing his face into his pleasant mask. "No matter. I've waited this long. I can be patient awhile longer." His eyes turned back to me, leering as they raked me from head to toe. "After all, what's a few hours, or even a few days when I will have you the rest of your life?"

I stood stock still, my body tensed and ready to flee but unable. My shoulders were hunched, my right hand gripping the elbow of my left arm, which hung straight at my side. It did not escape my notice that the captain had said the rest of *my* life, not his.

Captain Huckley turned to address Falstone with a sneer. "I have need of your master. Be a good lad and fetch him for me." He again pulled his pocket watch from his vest, resting it in his hand as he studied it.

Falstone didn't even flinch at Huckley's slight; he just stared unblinking as the captain went through his habitual time checking, then gestured toward the door. "Cecily?"

I didn't need any further prompting. I scurried from the room, Falstone close on my heels.

9

Falstone and I went together to deliver the message to Sir James and Princess Marilee, who took their time talking things over with me, leaving Captain Huckley to bide his time until they decided to hear him out.

Sir James had me recount what Huckley had said, the threats he had made. I told him what I knew of the contract, which was very little.

“He is a liar and a manipulator, so I don’t know if anything he says is true,” I admitted.

“What would you have us do, Cecily?” Marilee asked.

I just shook my head, unable to think or act as ice seemed to course through my veins. “I don’t know. I cannot ask you to—“

“If you are going to suggest that I should not do my utmost to keep you from *that man*,” Marilee said with a stern look, “you might as well save your breath.”

Tears crowded my eyes, making me feel like a weakling. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what is right. I can’t even think.”

Marilee crossed to me and wrapped me in her arms. “It will be all right. Leave everything to me. Emeline?”

I turned to see that Emeline had been there in the corner of the room, waiting to be needed, I supposed.

Marilee brought Emeline over to me, effectively handing my care over to the young girl. “You stay with Cecily. James, Falstone, come with me.”

Emeline took my hands and we sank onto a couch as Her Royal Highness led the two men from the room with all the confidence of the family she had been born to.

Emeline did her best to calm me, but her quivering strength was not enough to contain my disquiet. I stood, sat, then stood again. I paced and wrung my hands. Sat again. After waiting there for several minutes, I couldn’t stand it anymore, so Emeline followed me out into the corridor, where we waited down the hall as Sir James and Princess Marilee met once

again with the man who wished to tear my life apart. Even though Emeline held my hands, they seemed to grow colder and my stomach soured more each minute.

Finally, the door opened and Captain Huckley came out, red with suppressed anger, followed by Princess Marilee and Sir James. Marilee kept him in conversation and as they spoke, Falstone slipped from the room, his stride determined, his face set. His eyes fell on mine almost immediately, easily finding me where Emeline and I stood half-hidden behind a pillar.

I stayed there, awaiting his arrival, wondering if he would tell me what had been said in that room. Had my fate been decided? Was there any way I could avoid it without calling down ruin upon my own mother?

Falstone reached me, grabbing my hand and towing me along behind him as he continued down the corridor. I looked back at Emeline, sharing a confused glance with her, but I went willingly. The corridor was long, but we walked nearly to the end of it, Falstone's strides long and sure. I had to nearly run to keep up, and each step made my heart pound harder, the terror of Captain Huckley pressing down upon me, squeezing my lungs until I could barely breathe.

Falstone pulled me into a recessed doorway where we would be almost out of sight, but not quite.

I let my back fall against the wall and looked at him, desperate for him to say something.

His gaze, the one that saw and understood so much more than anyone else, took in my face and he hesitated for only a moment before speaking. "The princess has put him off for now."

My breath came a little easier. "How?"

"Originally they simply offered to pay back the money that he paid to your family. But he refused. He said he would accept only the conditions of the contract. Namely you."

"So then how...?"

Another moment of hesitation. "She told Huckley that his refusal was a shame since there was no way he can have you...because you've already been affianced to someone else."

I blanched. I had not thought Marilee would tell such a blatant lie. "But... who?"

"Me."

I opened my mouth, but there were no words for his revelation. Only a squeaking sound of confusion escaped.

One corner of his mouth pulled up. “Yes, it turns out that our princess is quite the liar.”

A breathy laugh escaped me. “I should not be surprised.”

He glanced over his shoulder, taking in details most people would miss, I was sure. “And now,” he said as he turned back to me, his eyes soft. “I think it’s best if I kiss you.”

I pulled my chin back. “I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t look so frightened,” he warned in a whisper. “Captain Huckley has us in his sights. I believe he is trying to catch us in a lie, so if you don’t mind, I think the best course of action would be for me to kiss you so that he will have proof of the veracity of my claim on you.”

“Oh...” *Oh!*

He shifted even closer, leaning in, dipping his head. He was in earnest. He was going to kiss me right here and right now, and I wanted him to yet I didn’t, but I really truly wished for it.

“May I?” he asked, the warmth of his words hitting my lips.

He should. Because Captain Huckley was watching, and Falstone was trying to save me from that beast of a man, and it was important that we convince him to leave. “Yes,” I breathed. “That would probably be—” Falstone swallowed my last word as his mouth fell on mine.

It was shocking, that first touch of his lips. Frightening and beautiful and ever so delicious. Unexpected. A melting warmth pooled in my head and seeped down into my heart. I had not thought I would enjoy such a thing. But this was Falstone, and even if it wasn’t real, he was so gentle and I sensed the caring behind his actions.

Then he slipped a hand behind my head and pulled me more fully to him and the kiss shifted. It wasn’t just caring or protectiveness. This felt like something more...visceral. More intense. Just more.

Too much more.

I stiffened. I wasn’t ready for such a thing. It was too new and confusing.

He pulled back immediately, breaking the kiss, but then pulling me to his chest, letting me rest my head there as I breathed heavily, my mind whirring as he held me lightly, giving me time to recover.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment.

“Are you?” He hadn’t seemed sorry when he’d been kissing me, and I didn’t think I wanted him to be sorry.

“I’m sorry I frightened you.”

I wanted to deny it, to tell him I was fine, but he *had* frightened me. So instead I asked, “Is he gone?”

Falstone pulled back, caressing my cheek and tucking an auburn curl back under my mop cap—keeping up the charade—before taking my hand and pulling me from the recessed doorway. He looked up casually, but I knew that it wasn’t casual at all. “Yes, I believe he has gone. But I would rather not leave you alone until I am certain he has left the property entirely.”

He followed my lead, allowing me to tug him toward the stairs that led to the servants’ quarters. He walked me up the steps then let me go, watching over me until I had shut myself in my room. There, I was free to panic and pace and try desperately to suck enough air into my lungs so that I wouldn’t feel light-headed.

The kiss was secondary. Yes, it took up a portion of my thoughts. Thoughts that wondered if there had been any sincerity behind it at all, or if he truly had been toying with me despite his intentions being noble. Thoughts of how much I had wanted that kiss to continue, but also how much it terrified me.

But despite the tumult of those thoughts, they didn’t hold a candle to the raging maelstrom swirling in my head over the appearance of Captain Huckley. There had been a moment, that moment when I had said no, when I believed that my bravery would be enough and I would be able to purge him from my life with nothing but my will and my friends by my side.

Of course, it couldn’t be that easy. All the gumption in the world wouldn’t make him give me up. Only a bald-faced lie had made him leave, and I didn’t believe for a moment that he was gone for good.

The next day, I went about my morning duties with false cheer, using up what little energy I had to put on a good face. Marilee didn’t need to worry about my difficulties. I was certain she felt helpless as it was and I had no desire to add to her distress.

When she went to have her daily meeting with Beatrice about the running of the house, I wandered outside, down the lane that led to the road. Should

I be packing my things right now and fleeing? Should I be running away to somewhere Huckley might not find me?

A deep-seated struggle raged within me: the fear driving me to go as far away from here as possible, my hope begging me to stay among the peace and friends I had found here. Perhaps I could simply go into Murrwood village and find a temporary position there. If the captain came back, Her Highness could tell him I was long gone. I'd run away before, why not do it again? But who would hire me? And how long would I have to stay away before it felt safe to return?

Though my head begged me to head for the road, my feet could only shuffle along, and I made little progress down the lane. An obliging rock offered itself up and I sat on it, too tired to do anything but deal with my warring emotions. I didn't want to run again. But if I didn't, would I ever feel safe? Would running make me feel safe?

There was no clear answer to such a question. It had been so many years since I had been in this situation that the shock of it all jumbled everything together. The only thing I could see was the tumult.

The crunch of footsteps approaching should have entered my consciousness much earlier than it did. Instead, it wasn't until he called my name that I caught on to the fact that someone stood in front of me. I had lost all awareness of my physical surroundings.

"Cecily?"

This time I looked up. Falstone filled my view, the sun behind his head lighting his hair like a halo. He was standing there in his uniform. Leather tunic, weapons hanging at his belt, granite strength, and a look of concern so profound that it nearly stole the air from my lungs. All I could do was blink up at him.

He crouched down, carefully resting a hand on my knee. "What are you doing out here?" he asked.

I looked about, taking in the tree-lined drive and feeling the rock beneath me. "I don't know." When my gaze returned to him, his brow had furrowed further.

"Have you eaten today?"

Had I? "I don't think so."

"Let's go back to the house." He stood and held out a hand.

I stared at that outstretched hand, and it struck me in that moment just how good he was. How selfless and eager to take care of others. He would

make a tremendous husband and father. But that's not what he wanted.

The sadness that saturated my heart at that thought took me utterly by surprise.

Why should it matter to me if he chose to be alone? I'd chosen the same path. We both had our reasons, and I would do well to remember what they were.

"You're not well, Cecily," he said after I'd stared for a long time without moving. He bent, wrapping one arm around my lower back and pulling on my hand with the other.

I didn't object, nor did I say anything. Instead I let him pull me to my feet, leaning into his side as he propelled me down the drive toward the house.

As Falstone murmured reassurances of "I promise you're safe here" and "He won't have you," I put one foot in front of the other, not really listening and certainly not believing his words. He led me around to the kitchen door, helping me to sit at the table once we were inside.

Emeline saw the state of me and quickly rushed to put a bowl of food before me, then pulled some hot water from over the fire and made me a cup of tea.

Falstone sat on the bench beside me, straddling it so that he was fully turned toward me, a warm hand resting on my back. I stared at the food in front of me but couldn't convince myself that it was worth the effort to actually take a bite.

"Shall I fetch Her Highness?" Emeline asked Falstone.

I snapped out of my reverie. "No. No, I am well enough. The princess does not need to worry any more than she already is."

Emeline pushed the bowl closer to me. "Then eat."

A twisted smile was torn from me at the gesture. Trust Emeline to believe that good food was the solution to all of life's ills.

10

Captain Huckley had been gone for nearly two days, and yet an uneasiness had settled into the pit of my stomach and would not leave. The numb, frozen feeling of yesterday had dissipated, replaced by a low, simmering rage as Captain Huckley's threats pounded on the inside of my skull, eating away at my peace of mind.

I took my nervous energy into the empty drawing room, desperate to order my thoughts. Would Huckley try to come back for me? Had he really paid the money? If he had, would he seek retribution from my uncle and my mother? Was it my job to prevent it if he did?

"You are wearing a hole in the floor."

I stopped my pacing and turned to face Falstone, who somehow had entered the drawing room and sat down without me noticing. I could only stare at him where he sat with feet planted wide, elbows leaning into his knees.

"What's troubling you?" he finally asked.

I let out a little guffaw, looking to the ceiling for answers. *What isn't bothering me?* "Did they ever bother to look for me?" The question burst from my mouth.

"Who?"

"My mother. Or my uncle." I waved that aside. "No, of course my uncle didn't. But my mother? Did *my mother* ever look for me? Or did she just assume I was dead and move on?" I continued pacing.

Falstone said nothing.

"Did my mother mourn my death? Does she mourn me still?" The question was more of a desperate wish than a real wondering, and the fact that I had solid reason to doubt her affection for me made anger bubble up. "Should I write to her and tell her I am alive? Should I warn her about Huckley? Does she deserve a warning?!" I yelled the last question.

"You're still angry with your mother?"

“Yes!” I closed my eyes and breathed, fisting my hands into my hair as I tried to calm down. “I had shoved it down—quite effectively, I might add. But having that man come here and try to *claim* me...” My stomach roiled at the mere thought.

“Yes.”

I turned away. I didn’t need permission to be angry, I needed to know what to do next.

“What’s the right thing to do?” I asked him. “Is it my responsibility? Am I responsible for the uncle who sold me, or the mother who gave me up without a fight? Is any of this my responsibility!?”

“I don’t know,” he answered quietly.

Of course he didn’t know. How could he have the answers to a situation he knew very little about? Especially when I myself had no idea. Still, I wished someone could tell me how to proceed.

I stared at Falstone, wanting to think of anything other than Captain Huckley and the hellfire that would soon rain down on me because of him. Because it would. I knew that deep down in my gut. I knew he would not leave me be. But there were no answers to be had and I just wanted to think on something else. Anything else. Studying Falstone’s face inevitably brought my mind to the fact that he’d kissed me. Quite boldly. Fervently, even.

My face heated and I looked away. He’d given me my first kiss for the sake of a ruse. Where did that leave us? Had he enjoyed kissing me? Was it merely an act of duty? And what did he think of me now, as he sat there, watching me slowly unravel? Perhaps he regretted the token kiss he’d given me.

Had I enjoyed kissing him? Yes.

Though it surprised me, the truth was quite obvious. *His kiss was...* I mentally sighed...*lovely*. A bit too much at the end, but that didn’t negate the fact that those first few seconds had been blissful enough to nearly make me forget my troubles.

I shook those thoughts loose. I had much more pressing matters. “If your father were in trouble, would you help him?”

He thought for several long moments. “I suppose...if he asked.”

“And if he didn’t? But you knew he was in trouble?”

He blew out a breath then shrugged. “It’s impossible to say without knowing the reasons for the problem. I hope I’m a good enough person to

want to help, but I also appreciate the virtue of dealing with the consequences of your own actions.”

My chest and throat ached with the pressure of my feelings. “I should not want my mother to suffer. Life has not been kind to her. But as much as I want to be a good person, I find I am not willing to sacrifice myself for her.” I choked on the last words as guilt rose up, strangling my voice.

“No child should have to make that choice.”

I turned my hands up. They were empty, offering none of the answers that I sought, so I let them fall back to my sides before resuming my pacing. My mind once again filled up with all the what-ifs, the doubts and questions.

“I think I should kiss you now.”

His words brought me up short and my chin pulled back. It was exactly what he’d said to me in the hallway when Huckleby had been watching. I looked about the room in an obvious way, gesturing to the corners of the room. “There is no one here to pretend for, Falstone.” I went back to pacing and chewing my thumb.

“I think I should kiss you anyway.”

I finally stopped and really looked at him. He sat there, his body coiled with tension and his eyes looking at me in a way that reminded me of our conversation in the library, except that this was...more.

Oh.

Perhaps his reasons for kissing me before had not *only* been for the ruse.

I fell back a step, my hand going to my heart then my throat before I clutched it with my other hand, bringing them both down to hold them tightly against my stomach.

His eyes never left my face. “Will you let me kiss you, Cecily?”

I took one tremulous breath before saying, “Yes.”

His eyebrows jumped, probably even more surprised by my easy agreement than I was.

I took a step forward and he eagerly pushed to his feet.

“There you are, Cecily,” Marilee declared as she breezed into the room.

Falstone and I both tried to skitter away from one another while turning to acknowledge Her Highness.

My face was aflame.

She reached a hand out to me. “Come along. Tea is set out on the veranda.”

I ducked my head and joined her, grateful that she didn't seem to notice anything amiss.

She wrapped her arm around mine and glided down the hall. "Did I interrupt something?" she murmured.

"What? No. Of course not."

"Ah," she said with a smirk. "So, yes, I did?"

"No, I—" I desperately needed to change the subject. "Why did you tell Captain Huckley that I was engaged to Falstone?"

She gave me her best wide-eyed innocent look. "Because I'm a mindless, sentimental princess who doesn't understand the intricacies of contracts and cares only for romance."

I should have known. Marilee was quite adept at utilizing the false assumptions of others when it suited her needs. "And he accepted that?"

She shrugged. "It's extraordinarily hard to argue with royalty when they refuse to see things your way."

"Do you think he's gone for good?"

She squeezed my arm. "I don't know."

"And if he shows up again, what shall I do?" My voice had faded to a whisper.

"Marry Falstone."

I rolled my eyes. "Be serious."

Her gaze was steady as she lifted one shoulder. "I'm not being *unserious*."

I didn't respond. Marriage in all its forms was not something I'd been willing to contemplate for many years. But seeing Marilee and Sir James had made me reconsider just a little. And then Falstone....

Well, marriage did not seem such a horrible prospect anymore, but that did not mean I truly *wanted* it.

When we stepped out onto the veranda, Emeline was leaning over the table that held the pastries.

"They look lovely, Emeline," Marilee complimented. "Now stop fiddling and come sit down."

Emeline curtsied in acquiescence and sat down without a word, scooting her chair closer to mine and taking my hand. I smiled down at her. She'd done that a few times the last couple days. It was clear that Captain Huckley's appearance had frightened her. All the people in the world that she trusted were sitting around this table, and it would be a tremendous

blow if she were to lose one of us. For her sake as well as Marilee's, I did my utmost to tuck away all my roiling worry and confusion. I took several deep breaths, determined that I would sit here for the next while and set my troubles aside.

Beatrice took charge of the teapot as usual. "Will you be riding today, Princess?" she asked as she poured.

"Of course," she answered, peeling off a piece of pastry. "I believe it's time for me to visit the fairy realm again." She slipped the bite of pastry into her mouth with a lift of her eyebrows.

I let myself smile. The fanciful bent of Marilee's mind was one of her greatest assets. She was naturally positive and vibrant, so after being freed from her awful marriage by the merciful death of her husband, she'd found solace in imagining bits and pieces of the surrounding land as otherworldly. Sir James had taken to calling her his wheat fairy after finding her with wheat heads tucked into her hair. It was the first time she'd discovered the "fairy realm," as she'd dubbed it. That particular part of the stream that ran between Sutton property and the Bridgefield lands was still one of Marilee's favorites.

"Back to the fairy realm again?" I asked with a smirk. "Why not go in search of something new? A mermaid lagoon, perhaps? With a magic moon hanging overhead?" I teased.

"I might just do that," Marilee said with all the appearance of seriousness. "You'll come with me, won't you?" she said, her eyes on me.

I tilted my head. "I am at your disposal as always, Highness. Though it hardly seems fair that I get to go galavanting with you in search of pixies and mermaids while everyone else must work."

"Galavanting with me is work. It's what all proper lady's maids do."

"So you expect me to be proper now? How will I ever manage?"

A burst of laughter escaped her lips. "I have faith in you."

Beatrice tutted with an amused shake of her head while Emeline hid her grin behind her cup.

"Now," Marilee continued, setting both her hands flat on the table. "As much as I would love to continue this ridiculous conversation, we do have serious things to discuss." She turned her eyes to me.

I swallowed. I'd been enjoying the reprieve, pretending my problems didn't exist.

“I wasn’t kidding,” Marilee continued, “when I suggested that you marry Falstone to prevent—”

I stood abruptly, turning my back on my dear friends. “I can’t.”

“But he could protect you.” There was a pleading in her tone.

“I can’t.” I turned back to look at them but couldn’t bring myself to sit. “And it wouldn’t be fair to him.” He didn’t want the responsibility of a wife. He wanted to be free to die for the sake of protecting the very woman who was telling me to marry him.

“Not marriage then,” Beatrice chimed in, patting Marilee’s hand to try to dampen the princess’s enthusiasm. “But a formal betrothal? A contract of our own?”

“Yes,” Marilee jumped in. “If he has a contract that he’ll try to enforce, then we could draw one up ourselves.”

“Wouldn’t the earlier contract take precedence?” Emeline asked and we all stared at her for a moment, surprised she was willingly offering up such an astute observation. “I’m probably wrong,” she said, dropping her eyes to the table.

“No,” I said. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Then why not marry him?” she asked, directing her question to the table.

I scoffed. “It’s a lifetime commitment. I’m not going to use him that way. It’s horribly wrong.” And even if he agreed, he’d come to resent me for putting that responsibility on his shoulders. “I won’t manipulate him into being shackled to me. That would make me no better than Huckley.”

Emeline looked up at me, her eyes wiser than they should have been. “He wouldn’t mind.”

I closed my eyes against the panic that such a consideration brought. “I won’t give my life to someone else!” When I blinked my eyes open, they were each staring at me. I just shook my head, unable to explain how my soul rebelled against such an idea. “I can’t.”

“It’s not a death sentence,” Beatrice said, her eyes kind and wise. “It’s a companionship, to a man who I think we all agree admires you.”

“That’s not enough. And this is *my* burden. No one else need carry it. I should just leave.”

“No!” the voices of all three women said in unison. I didn’t bother arguing, knowing they wouldn’t help me consider it, but knowing I needed to prepare for just such an option, because it might be my only one.

“Do you think the captain truly gave your uncle the money?” Marilee asked.

I thought for a moment, and the truth was, “No. I don’t believe he would ever part with his money without the guarantee that he would get me in return. He doesn’t do things out of the kindness of his heart. He doesn’t give for the sake of giving. If there was no trade to be made, I cannot imagine he actually did it.”

“So you think it was all a bluff?” Marilee’s face brightened a bit at that thought.

“Yes,” I said. “But I can’t *count* on it.” I could try to have faith and believe that Huckley could never truly enforce his contract, but wishing wouldn’t make it so. And I had no way of knowing what his motives might have been so many years ago. Perhaps he’d found good reason to pay off my uncle. I just didn’t know.

“Well then,” Marilee said, her brow furrowed in doubt even as she tried to hold on to her optimism. “We must send inquiries to Norsing.”

“But what if that strengthens his case?”

“We will”—I could see her mind turning—“be discreet. We will say nothing about you or the contract, only inquire after your uncle and his situation in general.”

I could barely manage a nod, appreciating her efforts on my behalf, but my hope continued to dim.

“In the meantime,” Marilee said, drawing herself up and showing a confidence that I knew was feigned, “if we hear any word of him returning here, we will simply run off to Dalthia. He can hardly enforce Winberg law if we are not in Winberg.”

I forced a smile. It was the best I could hope for, so I would allow these women to plan for that while I planned my escape.

True to her word, Marilee led out on her horse in search of her fairy realm. Sir James accompanied her today, which meant that neither I nor Falstone were truly needed, but she'd insisted we come anyway. She was either matchmaking or trying to keep my mind off of Huckley. Either way, I didn't mind it.

We followed along the stream that separated the broad, flat meadows of Sutton land from the Bridgefield land which butted up against the hills, letting the horses pick their way along the narrow path that cut through the undergrowth. The sound of Marilee's humming drifted on the breeze back to me, putting a smile on my face.

"Look, my darling," Sir James commented, sounding too innocent as we came upon a portion of the stream that was wider and deeper than the rest. "It's our swimming hole."

Marilee turned back to look at her husband with a glare. "It is not *our* anything. No swimming hole will ever be claimed by me." She turned forward again.

"What if there are mermaids in it?" I asked.

Marilee turned her head just enough that I could see her profile and hear her voice. "A mermaid lagoon would be lovely, so long as I never had to be in it. I would be more than content to sit on the edge and just enjoy the sights. And if anyone were to try to *haul* me in"—she abruptly turned to spear her husband with her dagger eyes—"they would suffer the consequences."

"Not to worry," Sir James agreed easily. "I learned my lesson the first time."

Ah. This must be the spot where James had carried Marilee into the water as a playful surprise, only to discover that she had a keen fear of water. Her brilliant imagination conjured ethereal images from the beauty of nature,

but it also came up with nefarious scenarios about water so deep that you couldn't see the bottom.

I drank in the sight of the cool swimming hole as we passed by, imagining how refreshing and free it would feel to immerse myself in it.

"You are disappointed," Falstone said as the path widened and he was able to pull his horse up beside mine.

I pulled my eyes from the rippling water and smiled, eager to set him at ease. "Only a little."

"Wading into a swimming hole appeals to you?"

"Swimming appeals to me." I tipped my head back to enjoy the vibrant green of leaves filtering sunlight overhead. "Especially in a place like this. It would be marvelous to float on my back, watch the clouds overhead and let the water carry my worries away."

"Lovely, indeed." There was a wistfulness to Falstone's comment.

I turned back to look at him and realized his gaze was fixed squarely on me and not on the water or the sky. I turned away to hide my blush, thinking of our very-near kiss that Marilee had interrupted.

Falstone cleared his throat. "When did you learn to swim?"

A wave of nostalgia washed over me. "There was a pond by my childhood home. My father taught me to swim. And to fish," I admitted with a laugh, "though I've forgotten most of that. I was his only child. There was no son for him to pass things on to. So I learned to ride, fish, swim..." I sank into a memory of tromping through a creek, my father coming to my rescue when I would get too far out in the water.... I shook it off. I so seldom allowed myself to pull out those memories, but they cropped up now along with the sense of love and security that I had enjoyed in my early years. Before my father's betrayal had been discovered and that security had been shattered. Before living in my uncle's home. Before Huckley had chosen me.

"Your childhood was a happy one," Falstone commented.

"For a time," I conceded, still lost in memory.

Marilee called back from up ahead. "We are approaching the fairy queen's domain now, so be on your guard."

Her feigned seriousness when speaking of imagined things left me shaking my head. "Should we expect a contingent of pixies to challenge our entry?" I asked.

“I think not,” she answered. “I am known here, so as long as you all behave with the proper decorum, we should be allowed entry.”

I just smiled in amusement. As we approached the spot where a little island sat in the middle of the stream with a young tree growing in the middle, I gave the most proper salute I could manage.

The princess and Sir James pulled their horses to a stop and James dismounted before helping his wife to the ground. They didn’t tell us what they were doing or where they were going. In fact, it felt very much as though they’d forgotten Falstone and me entirely as we watched them walk hand in hand toward the stream. Rogue circled around them before launching himself into the water. Sir James straddled the stream, one booted foot on the bank, the other resting on the little island, or fairy realm. He helped Marilee across and they both ducked beneath the low branches of the tree. The tree, though young, had enough foliage to almost conceal their upper halves once they were on the other side.

Blissful newlyweds. I wanted to be disgusted by their flagrant displays of affection. Instead it just made me smile.

“I don’t know about you,” Falstone said from beside my knees, “but I feel utterly superfluous at the moment.”

I hadn’t realized he had dismounted, but he stood now with one hand gripping the reins of his horse and the other resting on the neck of my own mount as he observed our ardent master and mistress with one eyebrow raised.

A small laugh escaped me. “It does make one wonder why they insisted on our company.”

He looked up at me, a radiant smile on his face. “Would you like to get down?”

“Oh,” I answered, a little blinded by his boyish grin. “Yes.” I accepted the offer and unhooked my right leg from around the pommel before resting both my hands on his shoulders. His large hands clasped my waist, and though I may have been mistaken, it felt as though he took longer than usual to settle my feet on the ground, and even longer to release his hold on my waist.

Once he did step back, we both took a moment to breathe some much-needed air, and Falstone pulled his wooden flute out of his saddle bag and went to throw himself onto the soft moss that blanketed the ground at the foot of a large tree. “Come sit,” he said, raising his flute to his mouth. “I

imagine we'll be here for a while." He started playing a tune and I went to join him there on the ground, grateful for the width of my riding skirt that allowed me to sit comfortably.

I leaned back against the tree, closing my eyes and trying to let my worry slide away, trying to believe that my life as I knew it wasn't going to be viciously ripped from my grasp at any moment. "What am I going to do?" I opened my eyes when I realized that the words had come out of my mouth. They weren't loud, only a whispered cry for help to whatever fairy might be listening.

Falstone's music stopped, so I knew he'd heard.

"Marilee thinks we can just run away to Dalthia if Huckley comes back," I admitted.

"That might work."

I turned to look at him. "It would only work if I stayed in Dalthia for the rest of my life."

His head tilted a little. "Would that be so bad?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. Dalthia is lovely, and a far cry better than the marriage and death being offered me by Huckley, but it would be an entirely new life. Without Marilee or Emeline. But..." My shoulders fell as I sighed in defeat. "Leaving here might be the only thing I *can* do. I just wouldn't be able to let Marilee help me." If I ran off to Dalthia, what would stop Huckley from tracking me down there and bringing me back by force? "If I must leave, then it could only be me, going not to Dalthia, but to...I don't know. Osna? Hemland? I've never been outside of Ebrad, but if I decide to leave here and truly run from Huckley, I would have to leave the country, disappear into the night. I'd have to run from everything and everyone."

"I could help." The sincerity in his gaze made my eyes burn.

I shook my head. Apparently he didn't think that *everyone* included him. "Your loyalty is to Marilee, as it should be. You can't go running off to protect me." No matter how much the idea appealed to me.

"I could," he insisted, moving closer, mischief in his eyes. "We could even ask for some magic help from whatever elves the princess has coaxed into her employ."

I laughed.

"We could fly away somewhere he'd never find you."

I smiled, grateful that he wanted to help, but even more grateful that he seemed to know we couldn't go together. That's why he was joking about it, because he knew it could never be. "Where would we go?" I asked.

"Anywhere. A hollow tree." His face was sad and laughing and disappointed all in one. I knew the feeling.

"A hollow tree would not fit us both."

He shook his head as if my objection was ridiculous. "The tree would only be the entrance. We could make an entire hideaway underground."

"Ah, of course. And shall we bring your little lost warriors with us as my protectors?"

His gaze softened. "They'd be eager for the job."

I let myself get lost in his eyes for several moments before taking a shaky breath and pulling myself from his stare.

I picked a few tiny, delicate flowers from the rich earth and twirled them in my fingers.

"My lady?"

I turned back to Falstone, shocked that he'd address me that way. Yes, it was technically my true title, but it wasn't *me*. I furrowed my brow at him.

He gave a half smile. "Please don't try to run on your own."

I wanted to protest. I wanted to tell him that surely he must know I didn't have a choice. But if I did that, he'd do all he could to keep me from leaving. I shrugged. "I know I wouldn't get very far." It was a lie. I had run before and I could do it again. I'd just lied to Falstone and I hated it.

He studied me for a moment, and I was sure he knew. With all his experience and powers of discernment, he must know it was a lie, but he let it alone.

Instead, he tipped his head back in the direction we had come from. "Do you suppose they'd notice if we snuck back to the swimming hole?"

I almost snorted a laugh. "They do seem occupied, but I don't imagine they'll stay that way for long."

He shrugged. "Another time then."

I raised my brow at him. "Another time? When do you suppose we would find the time to slip off for a swim at the very edge of Sutton property?"

He leaned in. "Under the cover of night," he said with a conspiratorial wink.

I just laughed.

This man. This good man. I'd never encountered anyone who could make me smile the way he could.

12

That evening, after I'd helped Marilee ready for bed, I made my way up to the servants' quarters to find Emeline and Falstone both standing outside the room I shared with Emeline. Falstone seemed to be talking while my young friend listened. I was surprised and impressed that she seemed at ease. "Might I help you?" I asked, pinching the fingers on my left hand with my right as nerves washed over me from the sight of a man just outside my room.

Falstone looked up, mischief swirling in his eyes. "We're going swimming."

I pulled my chin back and raised a brow. "We're what?"

"Going swimming, just as we discussed this afternoon."

I rolled my eyes. "We did not seriously discuss it. We joked about it. That is very different."

He was undeterred. "Regardless, I'm ready to go when you are."

"We cannot just run off to the stream." My cheeks heated at the very idea.

"Why not?" He was nonplussed.

"Because..." *of reasons!* Which I was certain would come to mind at any moment.

"We won't stay long," he assured me. "The moon is full and bright. Perhaps Emeline will even join us for the fun." He turned to look at Emeline, who thankfully looked flattered instead of terrified by the suggestion.

"Will you come with us?" I asked, realizing that strangely enough, I desperately wanted to go. I wanted to let Falstone bring me into his world of teasing and fun and sneaking out to go swimming. But it would be so much more proper if Emeline came with us.

She shook her head. "Early morning. You go."

"Are you certain?" I asked, then leaned in so that only she could hear my next question. "Is it horribly scandalous for me to go?"

She shook her head again, this time with a grin. "Have fun." She opened the door and stepped into our room, returning not a moment later with my cloak in hand, holding it out to me.

I took it, knowing that for all the reasons I wanted to protest, there were too many more that pushed me to go. I smiled at my young friend. "Thank you. I'll be back soon."

She just shook her head, her lips pressed tight against a smile as she shut the door.

Falstone was grinning from ear to ear when I turned back.

"It seems I've agreed to this foolhardy adventure," I said.

"It may be many things," he said, sweeping his hand in the direction of the stairs. "But foolhardy is not one of them. Now be quiet so that we can sneak effectively."

I stifled a laugh, knowing that though he teased, we really did need to be stealthy. I had no desire to start rumors about the two of us having clandestine meetings. Though the thought wasn't entirely unappealing.

I was a heathen.

Falstone took my hand and led me quietly down the back stairs. I tried not to get my heart into a twist over the fact that he so willingly held my hand in his, but it was a losing battle.

We stopped at the bottom of the stairs, checking the corridor before hurrying across to the library. We snuck in, closed the door behind us and made our way to the doors that led out to the veranda.

Stepping out into the night air made me nervous and exhilarated all at once. Falstone's steps were sure and quiet as he brought us to the doors of the stables and easily let us in.

"Are you going to abscond with a horse as well?" I asked into the darkness.

"It's called borrowing." A flame cut through the darkness as Falstone lit a lamp then made quick work of saddling a horse that looked confused by the late-night interruption, but willing enough.

"Up you go," he said a few minutes later.

"This isn't a lady's saddle," I protested.

"I cannot ride a lady's saddle, and we are only going to *abscond* with one horse. Now, up you go."

Only one horse? I was stunned enough by the idea that I didn't protest at all as he boosted me up onto the saddle before climbing on behind me.

I decided to ignore the fact that I could feel the breeze on my ankles since my dress was no substitute for a riding skirt. It was dark. No one would know.

“Ready to go adventuring?” he asked, his voice all too close to my ear.

“Yes,” I said, though my voice shook.

He chuckled as he set the horse into motion. “Nervous?”

“About stealing a princess’s horse and running off to go swimming in the dead of night? Yes, I am.” No need to admit that what made me most nervous was him, and his closeness and the feel of his solid chest against my back.

“What were you and Emeline discussing?” I asked in an attempt to divert the conversation.

“I wouldn’t say we were *discussing* anything. She’s as quiet as ever. I was just telling her about our ride, making the story more interesting than it was. Not as interesting as *your* stories, but I did what I could.”

“*My* stories?”

“The ones you make up for Ansel and Lindy.”

“Oh,” I said in surprise. “Yes, I suppose you did hear some of them.” My cheeks flamed, embarrassed by the reminder that he’d likely heard my tales of “Walstone.”

He just grinned and kicked the horse into an easy lope. I turned to face front again, our discussion suspended for the few minutes that it took for him to navigate the horse to the swimming hole. The speed of our arrival left me almost no time at all to anticipate the fact that I’d agreed to go swimming with this man.

So when he pulled the horse to a stop and immediately swung down, I found a large knot of anxiety in my chest, cutting off my ability to form words even as he reached up and pulled me down.

“Good thing it’s such a warm night,” he commented as he pulled off his coat.

Saints, what had I agreed to? “The water will still be plenty cold though, I would imagine.”

“There’s a hot spring that bubbles up just there.” He pointed to the top of the swimming hole. “That’s why this spot is so popular. Why it’s been broadened and deepened by generations of children coming here. Still, you’ll want the dry cloak afterward,” he continued as he sat down and tugged at his boots.

It took me a moment to wade through my own nervousness and realize that his rambling was not customary. I focused on him, and the way his eyes darted from his boots to me and then back again.

Was he nervous as well?

The idea somehow eased some of my own apprehension and I reached up to unlatch my cloak before pushing it from my shoulders and letting it drop behind me.

His eyes darted to me again, and this time his nerves were obvious. He pulled off his second boot and jumped to his feet, heading toward the water and wading in chest-deep before turning back to look at me. I rested a hand against the trunk of a tree to steady myself as I removed my shoes and stockings.

Falstone bobbed in the water, sending me glances. Perhaps he thought I wouldn't go through with it, but after I'd discarded my stockings, I seriously considered removing my dress as well. Only swimming in my chemise and stays would have been much easier, but I wasn't *that* much of a heathen. Instead I just took off my apron and my petticoat to decrease the number of layers inhibiting me, then I plucked up my courage and ran for the edge of the pond, wading in several strides before diving beneath the water. The cool water left me breathless for a moment.

I overshot his position on purpose, coming up behind him and several feet upstream where the source of the hot spring made the water warmer. He turned at the sound of my splashing, his eyes shadowed, the moon lighting his hair.

I kept my body submerged, letting just my shoulders and head stay above the water, hoping the dim light hid my blush as I admired the way Falstone's wet clothing conformed to his physique. Saints, he had a fine physique.

My dress tangled around my legs and as I tried to move, the heaviness of the fabric was too restrictive to ignore. I turned my back to Falstone and fought to unlace the strings that crossed my chest over my underthings, then pulled the dress from my shoulders.

"You've decided that not drowning is a higher priority than modesty?" Falstone asked from behind me. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Living tends to be my priority," I said as I pushed the fabric down my torso and over my hips before freeing my legs.

"Here," Falstone said and he appeared at my side, hand out.

I shoved my dress through the water in his direction. He took it and heaved it onto shore, where it landed with a lush plop.

He looked back at me and I was grateful for the minimal light and the inky blackness of the water that hid my undressed state. Apparently I *was* a heathen, swimming with a man in nothing but my chemise and stays—a man who was looking at my face like he was incapable of looking away.

The moment stretched, filled with night sounds and moonlight.

“You’re very quiet,” I said, though my sparse voice barely cut through the rustling leaves and chirping crickets.

He sank shoulder-deep into the water and moved a little closer to me. “You’re going to try to leave, aren’t you?”

My heart sank, and I swam a little away from him, maintaining distance. “What do you expect me to do, Falstone? Stay here and wait to see if Captain Death comes back, determined to get his hooks in me?”

“I would hope you could trust that there are people here who will protect you.”

“The only people I trust are Emeline, Marilee and Beatrice.”

I watched him swallow. “There are others.”

“Who?” I challenged. “My family? Shall I trust the criminal father that left me destitute? The uncle that sold me, or the mother that let him?” I pushed a wet hand across my forehead, trying to scatter the resentment that coiled around me. “I only trust my friends.”

“But *I* am your friend! Can you not trust *me*?” The hurt was written all over his face.

My shoulders sank. I had hurt him and I hated it. Because I *did* trust him. “You can’t protect me from the law.”

He pushed his hands through his hair in frustration. “It’s a ridiculous law!”

“I know!” I shouted, and the sound rang cold in the quiet night air. I closed my eyes, running a cool hand over my face. “Believe me, Falstone,” I said more quietly. “I know *exactly* how ridiculous it is.”

“What if he’s waiting for you to leave? Waiting for you to be unprotected?”

“That’s not—”

“He tried to manipulate you in Tethurn. He paid a man to hurt you in the hopes that you’d go running back to him. Do you really think he’s above

lurking in the shadows, waiting for a chance to take you when there's no one around to object?"

The worry that had been brewing just under the surface bubbled up, making me uncomfortable in my own skin.

"Do you think he'd be audacious and brazen enough to confront a household of people willing to defend you, including a member of Dalthia's royal family?"

I shook my head, my frame on the verge of trembling. "I don't know. I don't know what to think of him. I don't know what he's capable of. But I do know he won't just give up."

"So don't give up on us either," he begged. "Let us protect you."

My mouth opened, ready to protest, to tell him that I was right, that it was the only logical choice. I had to leave on my own terms, without involving anyone else. But what he'd said made sense. Huckley could very well be biding his time, waiting for me to be alone. I deflated, resigned. "Very well."

The tension melted from his shoulders.

I huffed a breath, trying once again to push my worries aside. "It's clear that you all would be very lost without me," I teased, backing away a little more, needing to separate myself from the emotion and from the draw of him. "Otherwise, you would not be so keen to keep a nobody like me around."

He scoffed, moving with me so that the space between us never actually increased. "Nobody? I think you meant to say *nobility*, Lady Cecily."

"A useless title if ever I heard one."

He chuckled. "That opinion is certainly not the popular one."

"Do you know what the difference is between my life in the house of my uncle and my life now?" I sent a splash of water his way. "I didn't get paid for the work I did in my uncle's house. Now I do."

His eyes darkened. "I'm sorry for what you—"

"Don't feel sorry for me," I interrupted him. "I told you before, my life here is practically charmed."

"Except for the shadow that haunts you."

"A shadow from my old life," I clarified. "The biggest reason I was happy to leave it all behind."

"So that you could pursue love on your own terms?" he suggested.

"So that I couldn't be owned." By Huckley, or any man.

He studied me for a moment, but instead of responding, he tipped his head back, fixing his gaze on the sky above. A moment later, he leaned all the way back. "Look at those stars." He spread his arms wide, floating there.

I just looked at him for a moment, admiring his strength and conviction, but mostly his gentleness. He'd used persuasion and logic to convince me to stay. No threats or manipulation. I dipped my head below the water, trying to wash my head of thoughts of admiration. If only the stream could rinse my mind of such things.

After coming up, I lay back and gazed up at the stars visible through the canopy of leaves, eventually closing my eyes and relaxing completely into the water and the darkness.

Floating there for a few minutes, everything was peaceful. There was nothing to frighten me or make me run. I could forget about the father who had abandoned me, the uncle who had sold me, the mother who didn't fight for me, and the man who wanted to claim me as his.

An arm wrapped around my waist and I pulled myself up, surprised by the touch. I latched on to Falstone's shoulders and looked at him with a question.

He swallowed, then nodded behind me. "If you drift too much farther that way, the current will carry you away."

I stretched down with my toes, trying to touch the bottom, but it was too deep. I could have pushed away, and probably should have, but his arm around me was...not quite comfortable, but...exciting? New?

I had to say something to break the tension. "Perhaps that was my master plan. Float away on the stream and end up in another kingdom all together."

"What kingdom is that?" he asked as his eyes dove into mine.

"The Never Kingdom. Where I'll never be found." I did push away then and he let me go. Once I was several arm's lengths away, I asked, "Have you ever been there?"

A corner of his mouth curled and some of the seriousness left his eyes. "To the imaginary Kingdom of Never? No." He used a few fingers to flick water at me. "Have you?"

I nodded. "Tethurn was Never. Then Bridgefield was. Then Dalthia. And until a few days ago—here." I could see that he didn't quite understand, but he was trying to. "Anywhere I feel safe is my Never Kingdom." It must

have been this swimming hole, so close to Marilee's fairy realm that conjured such fanciful ideas.

"What about your home? With your father and mother?"

A sharp pain cut into my heart. "It should have been. And for my very youngest years, it was. But that was an illusion, one shattered by my father's betrayal and abandonment. The place I was happiest, the place I felt loved the most was shattered by what he did, and what came after."

"Your father...what did he do?"

My stomach pinched. I hated this subject probably more than any other. "He was part of a—" I chewed my lip for a moment. "An uprising. Or, at least, a planned uprising." My brow furrowed. I knew so little about what he'd been accused of. I didn't understand it.

"Uprising?" Falstone prompted.

"There was a group. Merchants from the village. Townspeople. Even some of his tenants. They believed he'd be a better ruler than the duke."

"Your father planned to wrest power from the duke?"

I shrugged. I should have just said yes, but there was still a little girl inside me determined to defend her papa. "So they say."

Falstone's gaze stayed fixed on me, his eyes soft with compassion.

I looked away, forcing my dark thoughts aside and coming back to the topic at hand. I wondered where Falstone's Never was. "What about you?" I tilted my head, thinking. "Where is your safety? Is it a shadow wrapped around you, or do you carry it with you along with your sword?"

He smiled, full and amused.

"What?" I asked.

"You look like one of the mermaids from your stories."

I splashed him. "You've spent too much time around Marilee."

"Says the woman who's been philosophizing about the Kingdom of Never," he said, swimming closer to me.

"I'm not a mermaid," I protested as my heart jumped at his nearness.

"You object to being compared to a beautiful sea creature?"

I shook my head in exasperation. "You know, in most stories, mermaids are more akin to sirens, using their song to lure men to their deaths." I narrowed my eyes at him.

A grin stole over his mouth. "So it *is* an apt comparison."

I splashed him in retribution. "I am not luring anyone." I leaned back and pulled my knees up, preparing to kick away from him, but he lunged

forward and caught hold of my ankle, pulling me toward him.

A sharp intake of breath filled my lungs as he brought me close enough to wrap an arm around my waist. “Are you sure of that?” he asked.

I had been very sure just a moment ago, but now I was sure of nothing at all.

He must have been tall enough to stand here, but my feet were dangling in the water, my knee brushing his leg, nothing but his arm to anchor me, waiting to see what would happen next.

“I don’t think you’re playing fair,” I whispered. Though, honestly, I wasn’t sure I cared about fair at that moment.

“You don’t even know the rules.” His gaze skimmed over my mouth.

I let my hands wrap around his upper arms. “Like I said. Unfair.”

His hands tightened on my waist. “Do you want to know the rules?”

“I’d at least like to know the objective of the game,” I whispered, nervous and fluttery.

“I think,” he said thoughtfully, gazing down at me, “that I’ve already obtained my objective. And I think”—he pulled me just a little bit closer—“that I should kiss you now.”

I managed to keep my wits about me just enough to say, “My lure worked” before his lips were brushing over mine, his kisses soft and sweet, but landing in quick succession. He never lingered, never pushed too hard.

But that only left me wanting, so I finally wrapped my hands around the back of his neck and held him in place so that I could capture a kiss truly worthy of this moment under the moon and stars.

His grip on my waist tightened as his mouth pressed firmly to mine and he breathed me in. A few moments later as the fervor between us increased, I had the thought that perhaps I should not have encouraged such kisses when we were alone. I’d never felt this way. My head was so full of new and breathless intensity that it was difficult to keep my senses. *I should pull away. I should.*

Falstone’s clutch tightened just before he abruptly pulled back and swam away, leaving me to tread water.

Our breathing was louder than any of the night noises now.

How glad I was in that moment, as our eyes locked and the heat burned between us, to know that Falstone was a man not only of honor, but of control.

I let my head sink below the surface, needing the cool water to ease the burning in my cheeks and chest.

When I surfaced, Falstone was nowhere in sight, but he broke through the water a moment later, shaking the water from his hair and face. We locked eyes and he grinned. "Siren," he accused.

I sputtered a laugh but had to respond in kind. "Pirate."

"Pirate?"

"Only pirates fall into a siren's snare."

"Fine," he acquiesced, slowly closing the gap he had created. "Mermaid, then."

"Does that mean you wish to be a respectable sailor?"

He shook his head with a smile. "Just a soldier. A protector." He eased a little closer and my heart rate sped again.

"I like the sound of that."

"Good." He splashed me and then sank beneath the surface and swam away.

I chased after him and we fell into a game of splash, catch and release. We didn't let ourselves kiss again, both knowing that it was better to maintain a little distance. But a thrill ran up my limbs and spine each time he caught hold of my foot or my waist.

Later, as we both lay floating on our backs, admiring the way the moon lit the trees with silver, I realized that life as a servant had even more advantages than I'd considered before. I would never have gotten away with such impropriety as a nobleman's daughter.

The trade was well worth it.

13

Two days later, my head was still halfway in the clouds. Or, more accurately, still floating in a stream surrounded by moonlight. I'd never felt anything like what I now felt for Falstone.

I was straightening Marilee's room, humming as I put away her night things and made up her bed, when Sir James appeared in the doorway.

"Sir." I dipped into a curtsy. "The princess is visiting neighbors."

"Yes, I know." It was the tone of his voice that made me wary. "I was looking for you, actually. Would you mind coming downstairs? Captain Huckley has returned."

The world collapsed around me. No. This could not be happening. Not now. All the worry and dread that had dissipated with Falstone's reassurances came rushing back, fear cramming itself into every corner of my body. I should have run. *How could I have been so STUPID?* "But..." My protest was weak and defeated. Falstone had convinced me to stay, and now he wasn't even here to lend me his strength.

Sir James's stance and expression were pure apology. "I would not put you in the same room with him, but...this time he's brought Magistrate Phillips from Murrwood village. This is his jurisdiction. I'm afraid we need to hear the captain out and listen to what the magistrate has to say."

I took a step back, wanting to do anything but go downstairs and see that man again. I looked around, wondering if I could hide, or run right now. Maybe Sir James would even help me. But as I looked at him, at the defeat that coated his face and the regret in his eyes, I knew his hands were tied. I couldn't ask him to defy the law.

"I've not had many opportunities to deal with the magistrate," he continued. "But he seems a fair and diligent man. I'm certain we can sort this out." He said the words, but his face told me otherwise. As I stood there, still frozen in my grief and horror, he hesitated for a moment and then

gave the tiniest nod of his head, as though he'd made a decision. "I will let them know you will be down soon."

He left and I heard his footsteps retreating down the hall, shocked that he would trust me to follow after him. What made him think I would voluntarily give myself up? Did he think I was that blindly obedient? I thought he knew me better than that.

The world suddenly pulled itself into sharper focus. Sir James *did* know me better than that. He wasn't blindly trusting me...he was giving me an opportunity.

If I left now, without any encouragement from him, then he would not be culpable, but I could still be free.

My feet stayed frozen to the stone floor for one horrible moment of indecision.

And then I ran.

I didn't grab anything. I took no time to do anything at all; I just fled down the hallway in the opposite direction from where Sir James had gone, and then flew down the servants' stairs, stepping as quietly as my haste would allow.

Slipping silently into the kitchen, I saw Emeline, her thick blonde braid trailing down her spine as she stirred something on the stove. She didn't see me, for which I was grateful. I did not want any witnesses. I padded across the stone floor and exited the kitchen without looking back.

My destination was unknown. My direction unclear. The only thought in my head was simply to get away. The sight of the stables off to my right caused me to veer in that direction. I would steal a horse. Or, borrow one. Marilee would lend me a horse, wouldn't she? My chances of escape were infinitely better if I was not on foot.

The stable bounced in my vision as my feet sped across the ground, fistfuls of skirts clenched in my hands.

I barely had a glimpse of the hulking shadow coming toward me before his arm snagged around my waist, halting my progress and pulling me off my feet.

"Oh, no you don't," the man's voice crowed in triumph even as I fought and kicked. "The captain said you might try to run. Imagine how grateful he'll be when I return you to him."

"Let go!" I shrieked, trying to pry his hands from around me.

“No chance of that.” He managed to capture both of my wrists in one hand while keeping his other arm around my middle, half-dragging half-carrying me inexorably back to the house.

When we reached the front of the house, a footman was stationed outside. Had he been ordered there by Sir James?

“Open up, would you?” said the man who was pulling me along. “I’ve got a delivery for the magistrate and the captain.”

The footman, whose name was Simon, looked as though he wanted to do anything but open the door. His eyes held pity and an apology as he reached for the door, swinging it wide.

I dug in my heels one last time, but my shoes simply slipped across the stones and over the threshold, into the chaos beyond.

Sir James stood in the middle of the entry, tall and proud, as Captain Huckley shouted at him, demanding to be let upstairs so that he could find me himself. A third man, whom I recognized as the magistrate only by the uniform he wore, was standing between them, looking weary.

“I’ve got the girl!” the man holding me announced. “She tried to run.”

All eyes turned toward us as he thrust me forward, causing me to stumble into the candlelight of the entryway.

Sir James closed his eyes in defeat. Captain Huckley looked at me with hunger and malice.

Only the magistrate remained calm. “Let her go, Reeve.” The magistrate’s words were spoken with undeniable authority. Still, it took the constable who held me a few beats more to release me. I sensed his hesitation to give in, despite the demands of his superior. He gave me a little shove before letting me go and stepping back.

I stood there, shaking in defeat.

“Come, Cecily,” Sir James said, a hand outstretched toward me.

I quickly scurried to his side, desperate for any safety he could offer. He placed a large comforting hand on my shoulder, then turned to the other men.

It suddenly struck me that these men were all still standing in the entryway. It was very rude of Sir James to make them wait there instead of installing them in the library or drawing room. I imagined it had been done on purpose, as an act of defiance. A defiance that would turn out to be as fruitless as my attempt at running.

“Now that your constable has manhandled my servant,” Sir James began with reproach, “would you kindly explain to me what has brought you here? Again? I thought the matter was settled, Captain Huckley.”

A smug smile curved the captain’s mouth. “As I explained when I was here before, Sir James, I have come to collect what is mine.” He pulled out a piece of parchment and brandished it before him. “I have a contract here signed by myself, Lady Wendolyn, and her guardians, agreeing to a marriage that has not yet taken place. I have been all too *patient*, and it is time for Lady Wendolyn to fulfill her obligation.”

The air was sucked from my lungs and I lost all feeling in my limbs as I watched Sir James step forward to take the contract in hand and look it over. The dent between his brows grew deeper and deeper, and I could only wilt where I stood as Captain Huckley turned his eyes to me, triumphant. “I have a home waiting for you, my darling. I wish to make you mistress of it, to start our life together. I wish to raise you from this degrading position and restore you to the life you were born to.”

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t. The walls were falling in, crushing me under their weight. My chest tightened and it was difficult to breathe. Captain Huckley had brought the contract. He had brought a magistrate. I could not see a way out of this horror. Would I have to leave with him? Did that cursed contract mean that I would have to go with Captain Huckley now? This very day?

Sir James finally looked up from the contract, and the worry there nearly undid me. He shifted his attention to the magistrate. “Is this a legitimate contract, Magistrate?”

The magistrate chewed on his words for a moment, as though it pained him to respond. “It is, Sir James.”

He turned to me, true worry creasing his brow. “Is this your signature, Cecily?” James asked, obviously hoping that it wasn’t.

“Yes, but I didn’t sign it willingly. My uncle forced me—”

“Of course you would make that claim now, but we have no reason to believe it,” Huckley declared.

James looked to the lawman in desperation. “Magistrate?”

“I’m sorry, Sir James. The contract is clear. It must be abided by unless both parties agree to dissolve it.”

Captain Huckley clapped his hands together as if it was all happily settled. “And I agree to no such thing. I’ve waited nearly ten years for you,

my darling. I have ever been loyal—to you.”

Anger slipped through my devastation and I glared at him. “Why couldn’t you have found someone else? Some other wife to torture?” I spat. It was wrong of me to wish him on someone else, especially knowing what had happened to his other wives, but it was difficult in that moment to care about anyone but myself.

The captain put on a look of patient understanding. “I know you believe the rumors. I know you’ve been influenced by those who wish to destroy my reputation.”

“I’ve been influenced by the fact you have three dead wives,” I protested, my vision blurring around the edges. “And I *will not* marry you!”

“But you must understand,” he continued, ignoring my protest. “I could not move on. I had lost too much already. I knew you were alive and well in Tethurn, and I let my pride get in the way of bringing you home then. I will not make that mistake again.” He crossed to me, picking up my hand from my side, which I yanked away, but he just grabbed it again and held it in a vice grip against his chest. “I’m sorry you’ve been poisoned against me, but in two weeks’ time, we will marry, and I will prove my devotion to you.” He pressed a firm kiss to my hand and a solitary tear streaked down my face as hopelessness settled into my chest.

I finally managed to extricate my hand from his and took a step back. “You cannot make me.” I tried to sound brave and sure, but my voice shook.

A wicked gleam lit his eyes. “Perhaps I cannot.” He nodded toward the magistrate. “But he can.”

I turned to the magistrate. “Surely I cannot be made to honor a contract that I was forced to sign.”

“Do you have proof that it was forced?” The magistrate asked, fruitless hope in his eyes.

“I ran away from home and became a servant to escape him! Surely that speaks to my desperation.”

“That was more than a year after the contract was signed,” Huckley argued. “Perhaps you had fallen for some young chap who convinced you to elope with him.”

A bitter scoff escaped my lips. “If that were true I’d been happily married right now. You found me in Tethurn; you *know* I was a servant.”

“There are all manner of people who could have convinced you to give me up. If you had been truly opposed, why not run away immediately after everything was signed?”

“Because I had nothing! I was a destitute child.”

He gave me what might have been a pitying look if he wasn't clearly running out of patience. “My darling, I was there when you signed it. I witnessed it, as did your mother and your uncle.”

The magistrate seemed to latch on to this fact. “Would your mother testify that you signed unwillingly?”

“I—“ *Would she?* “She might...” Even I could hear the weakness of my conviction.

“She might?” Huckley taunted. “Your own mother who adores you *might* support your story?” He turned to the magistrate, giving him a look of *Surely you don't believe this girl?*

“She didn't adore me,” I argued, the bitterness of her betrayal rising up. “She was too terrified of my uncle to care for me properly.”

The captain let out a deep sigh. “I grow weary of this, Wendolyn. It is time to go.”

“But—” I looked to Marcus, the guard who stood at the edge of the room, but I knew he wouldn't make a move unless Sir James ordered him. I turned my desperate gaze to the magistrate, hoping for some sliver of hope.

He seemed to be thinking hard, and finally turned to Captain Huckley. “Do you have proof that you fulfilled your part of the contract?”

My chest filled with hope which was immediately squashed at the sight of Captain Huckley's grin.

“As a matter of fact—” Huckley pulled a piece of parchment from inside his vest and handed it over to the magistrate.

As the magistrate read, his face transformed into a horrible look of resignation and my heart sank. “It is a letter from the magistrate at Norsing, certifying that the captain's part was indeed fulfilled.” He looked up at me, pity filling his eyes. “I'm sorry, my lady,” he said.

“There you have it,” Captain Huckley declared. “It is time to go.”

“No!” I protested, turning to the magistrate. “Arrest me! I am refusing to honor the contract. Arrest me.”

The pure pity that filled his gaze left me desolate. “Even if I did that, I would then be obliged to hand you over to the man who is to be your husband.”

“*What?* No!” This couldn’t be happening.

“Come, Wendolyn,” Captain Huckley insisted.

I looked to Sir James, who seemed ready to boil over with rage. “You cannot mean to take her with you now,” he insisted, indignation painting his face. “You will not be married for two weeks. Where will she stay in the meantime? Surely you can give the young lady some time. Let her stay here until the time for the marriage arrives. She can properly prepare and pack. She can say goodbye to my wife, who deserves more than to have her good friend taken from under her nose.” His voice rose louder and louder with each protest.

“Indeed,” Huckley said with steady determination. “No one deserves that. I certainly did not deserve for my beloved fiancée to be spirited away, vanishing into thin air. And I will not risk that happening again.” He gave the magistrate a hard stare. “If you please, sir?”

The magistrate drew himself up and turned to me. “My hands are tied as much as yours. You must abide by the contract.”

“You cannot take her to your home when you are yet unwed!” Sir James protested.

“Do not insult me, sir!” Huckley yelled. “I would *never* tarnish my Wendolyn’s reputation in such a fashion. She will be installed at my mother’s home, where she will be loved, cared for, and given the time to plan and prepare until the time for our marriage arrives.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but he turned his gaze on me and the blaze in his eyes shut my mouth.

“Or,” he said, then left a grand pause, no doubt on purpose. “If that is unsuitable, I will arrange for us to marry the moment we arrive.”

Something cracked and broke inside me. My hope died and my chest convulsed as I tried to swallow my pain and accept that I had lost. I was a lost girl, being forced to grow up. This was going to happen.

I blinked in shock and turned toward the stairs. “I will go pack my things.”

“No need,” Captain Huckley insisted. “I will happily buy you anything and everything that you require. You must leave this common life behind and remember who you truly are.”

I didn’t know I could feel worse, but somehow his denial did just that.

“Surely you will not deny her the dignity of taking her own possessions with her,” James said with incredulity.

“And allow her the opportunity to run again?” Captain Huckley scoffed.

We looked to the magistrate, whose expression was grim. “He is to be her husband, he has the right—”

“But he is not her husband yet!” James yelled, and I could see the effort it took for him to stand down even as much as he was. The helplessness he must have felt when there was nothing he could do to save me from this. “Cecily, go fetch your things.” He stared down the magistrate and Captain Huckley.

“Very well,” the magistrate agreed, then turned to me. “I will escort you upstairs. I’m sorry, but you tried to run once, and I must uphold the law.”

I moved my head in a weak imitation of a nod and walked to the stairs.

A numbness was setting in and I welcomed it, allowing it to drive me into completing my task without having to think much about it. I had just finished filling my small bag when Emeline and Beatrice burst into the room.

“Cecily!” Emeline cried before wrapping her arms around my waist and burying her face in my shoulder.

My numbness cracked in the face of her pain. I looked to Beatrice for support, but she too had tears shining in her eyes. She shook her head. “This cannot be,” she said in a fierce whisper. “They cannot make you.”

“That’s what I thought too...but they can and they are.”

“Not with that man!” she insisted.

Anger reared up. “Yes, with that man! I’ve been living on borrowed time as it is. It’s my own fault for thinking that I could escape the dictates imposed upon me. So yes, I will go with *that man*, because I have *no choice*.”

Emeline’s wracking sobs against my chest were chastisement enough for my outburst. “I am sorry, dear,” I said as I kissed her head. “I will be fine. I am sure I will be fine,” I lied. Nothing would be fine. I looked to the window. Could I crawl out of it? I didn’t think there was anything to hold on to.

“They will figure something out,” Beatrice said with conviction. “Sir James and Princess Marilee, they will not leave you to this fate. I know it.”

This time I was better at controlling my anger at her useless optimism. “They don’t have a choice either. So don’t be angry when they give up and realize they can’t save me. It’s not their fault.”

It was my uncle's fault. It was my own *mother's* fault. And ultimately, it was my father's fault.

If only I had run in a different direction. If only that constable hadn't been waiting for me to run. If only I had run earlier.

"Then Falstone," Beatrice insisted. "He won't stand for this."

Falstone. I closed my eyes, mourning his loss. If only he had been here. Not that he could have done anything. On second thought, perhaps it was better that he wasn't here. I would hate for him to get himself into trouble with the magistrate. If only the lawman wasn't waiting outside my door right now, I could have looked for another way out. A closet to hide in. Anything.

"I love you both so much. You are my family," I said past the giant knot in my throat. "Take care of Marilee. Don't let her blame herself."

"I'm sorry," Magistrate Phillips's voice came from the doorway.

My heart sank. I was out of time.

"The captain is getting impatient," he said. "It's time."

Helplessness welled up inside me. They would make me go. This man of the law would force me to go. I wanted to blame him for being complicit, but I knew he had no choice. And it was clear he hated having to enforce the contract. So I just nodded even as his words washed me in bitterness.

As much as I wanted to turn and run, I drew myself up, searching for some sort of dignified armor to put on before I had to be in Huckley's presence again. I reached back to remove Emeline's arms from around me, but she fought it, clinging to me. "Please don't go. Please don't go!" Her adamant words tore at my heart, her wailing reminding me of just how young she was.

"I have to. I'm sorry," I said, trying to fight back tears. "Beatrice, help, please."

"Come here, dove," Beatrice entreated, pulling Emeline away and wrapping her in her arms even as Emeline reached out for me, trying to break free of her great-aunt.

I picked up my small bag of belongings and left the room, refusing to look back as Emeline's wails filled the halls, louder than I'd ever heard her before.

I was vaguely aware of the sound of the magistrate's feet following along behind me, but I kept my eyes straight ahead. Captain Huckley awaited me at the top of the stairs, checking his watch once again before snapping it

shut. He looked to me as he tucked it away in his pocket, looking puffed up and satisfied, and more than a little bit vengeful. I did not want to think of the ways in which I would pay for the freedom I had enjoyed the past nine years.

Huckley fell into step behind me and I fought not to let my step falter. I did not allow myself to stop or even slow down as we descended the stairs and crossed the entry where Marilee and Falstone now stood, arguing with Sir James and Constable Reeve.

I averted my eyes and fixed them on the door. If I were to meet Falstone's gaze, I would be undone.

"Cecily," Falstone called, his voice filled with tension, but I ignored it.

Captain Huckley took hold of my arm, no doubt to ensure my continued compliance, but I was already resigned.

"James, do something!" Marilee shouted.

"I can't, Marilee. I tried everything, but they have proof."

"But she didn't agree to it!" she screamed as I passed through the front doors. "They can't force her into it."

"Her signature is there, Marilee. Our hands are tied." Sir James's voice begged for understanding.

I felt badly for him. He did not deserve the blame.

The gravel crunched beneath my shoes as Captain Huckley hustled me into a carriage, climbing in after me and shutting the door with a sound that was strangely like a death knell.

As the carriage lurched forward, I spared one glance toward the house, only to see Falstone burst through the front doors, the magistrate right on his heels. "CECILY!" he shouted, running after me.

But the carriage rolled on and his shouts soon faded into the wind.

The ride to Huckley's home took nearly the entire day. And as the hours passed, I tried my best to accept what lay before me. There were still many bits and pieces of me that continued to hope, that believed that some solution would present itself and that I would not be forced into marriage with the snake that occupied the carriage with me. But I knew those hopes were fanciful. Wisps of false light that would bring me nothing but further darkness.

Perhaps it would not be so terrible. Perhaps his false devotion would be enough to keep him from hurting me. Perhaps his wives' deaths truly were accidents.

Perhaps I should hope that he would kill me sooner rather than torturing me for years on end, the way that Damian had tortured Marilee, tearing her down one piece at a time.

For a long time, I sat in nothing but despair, and then the anger set in. Anger at myself for not trusting my instinct to run earlier. Anger at Marilee, at Emeline and Beatrice, at Sir James. Anger at Falstone. They'd told me I would be safe, and I'd let myself believe them. I'd let myself trust that they could protect me when I knew better. What was wrong with me? *I knew better! Why hadn't I run days ago?*

It was near the dinner hour when Captain Huckley moved from the seat across from me to the seat beside me. I continued to stare out the window as he scooted closer and raised a hand to caress the auburn waves that hung by my ears. "You are even more magnificent to look upon than you were all those years ago." He pushed my locks behind my shoulder and breathed in the scent of my hair. "I cannot wait to see you in the gowns and jewels I will provide for you."

I didn't answer, just continued to stare out the window as the sky turned to gray and a hollowness welled within me.

We stopped soon after at an inn to have dinner before continuing on. I was only able to eat a few small bites of food as my stomach rebelled at my situation.

I didn't speak the entire journey and I do not believe my future husband even noticed. He would start speaking every once in a while, droning on about the fine house he had prepared for me or the beautiful view I would enjoy.

As if it had all been done for me, despite the fact that I'd been lost and forgotten for nearly a decade.

We arrived at his home just after sunset. I could smell the sea, and as the carriage wheels clattered up the drive, the sound of waves reached me as well. The house itself was surrounded by thorny hedges and looked ominous in the dim light, but Captain Huckley was all smiles.

My apprehension grew when the carriage stopped before the large front doors of the house. I swallowed hard and forced my voice to work. "Where is your mother's home where I will be staying?"

"Why, it is right here."

"And your house is elsewhere?" I said, grasping on to any hope, though my insides squirmed, knowing something was wrong.

He laughed lightly. "Of course not, my dear. My mother occupied this house with my father, and when he passed, it became mine. So I have brought you to my mother's home, but it is also my home."

I fought to keep my breathing from quickening out of control. "I look forward to making her acquaintance." And if the world held any kindness for me, she would be inclined to be at least somewhat sympathetic toward me.

"She would have adored you, I have no doubt."

Would have? I swallowed hard.

"Alas, my mother passed on some years ago."

"But," I sputtered, my heart galloping out of control. "You said I would be at your mother's home."

"Which you are."

"Loved and cared for."

"By me, naturally. *I* love you." He ran his fingers down the side of my neck. "And *I* will care for you." He leaned forward, placing a kiss to my forehead.

I should have been disgusted, repulsed, but I was in too much shock. He had played me false. Played us all false. I was to live in his home starting immediately. No chance to ease into anything. No hope of a benevolent mother who would champion me.

I shoved down my panic and pulled up my indignation. “Sir James objected to the impropriety of such a situation, and you declared that you would not insult me in such a way. And yet, you clearly meant to bring me here.”

His expression darkened. Gone was the feigned adoration, replaced by a dangerous tilt of his head. “As I said before, if this situation is unsuitable, we can be married on the morrow. Saints, we could marry this very hour if my accommodations are so *unsatisfactory*. But I do not wish to be a brute. I am trying to have a care for your feelings, your innocence.”

I wanted to spit in his face, but his threat kept me silent. All I could do was turn away and refuse to answer at all.

He helped me from the carriage and then wrapped my hand around his elbow, trapping it there with his other hand as he led me inside, into the cage where I would be kept the rest of my days.

He gestured to the grand staircase and pointed out the chandeliers. He introduced me to each servant we passed. “This is Lady Wendolyn, but she will soon be the lady of the house,” he said to the butler.

“Your new mistress has arrived and she must receive your loyalty” was his edict to the housekeeper.

A manservant with impeccable posture and cold eyes met us at the top of the stairs.

“My darling,” Huckley said to me. “This is my valet, Smeed. My most trusted servant. You can look to him for any help you might need, and he always knows where to find me.”

Smeed bowed, proper and deferential, but with no warmth. He and Huckley suited each other, but he made me even more uncomfortable than I’d already been. Still, I did my best to bow my head in acknowledgment. Acting the part of a lady was not easy for me. I’d been beating the nobility out of myself for so long that trying to bring it back was a struggle. But I had to do it. If any of these servants were going to give me an ounce of respect, I would have to act the part.

Eventually, the captain led me up to a bedchamber where a small maid was standing outside the door. “This is Helen,” he said, gesturing toward

the maid who kept her eyes on the floor. "She will be looking after you. It has been a long day and I'm certain our journey has tired you, so I will say good night. I hope you sleep well." He stepped close, too close, and set his lips to my forehead. My insides crawled in disgust. "And tomorrow, we shall begin to plan our future together." He stepped back, lifting my hand to lay one more kiss upon it before turning to go.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow I would still be here.

And the day after, and the day after that.

How was a person supposed to survive when they were utterly devoid of hope? It did not feel possible.

"Miss?" came the quiet voice of the servant.

I turned and she gestured toward the room where I was to stay for the next two weeks. I went inside, noting with indifference the fine furnishing and the quality of the fabrics that draped the bed. "What was your name again?" I asked the servant girl, my voice rough.

She bobbed a curtsey. "Helen, miss."

"And does your master treat you well, Helen?"

She raised her eyes to meet mine, her eyes confused. "Well, miss?"

"Is he kind?"

She blinked. "I don't understand."

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Never mind." Her utter bewilderment was answer enough.

That night I lay in the finest bed, swathed in the softest nightdress I had ever worn. I was to sleep in comfort and luxury. But I'd never been so uncomfortable, never felt so downcast. If only I could go to sleep and never awake.

I never thought new gowns could crush my spirits. I learned otherwise the next morning when Helen opened my wardrobe to reveal a plethora of new gowns that Captain Huckley had purchased for me. Evidence that he had invested a good deal of money in my keeping after he'd found me at Sutton Manor. How had he managed to have so many dresses prepared in only a few days?

"Which would you like to wear?" the timid maid asked.

"I don't care. You choose."

She helped me into my stays and then chose a deep-green gown, lacing up the back and tying the ribbons that decorated the sleeves. Then she gestured to the chair that sat in front of a dressing table. It was strange indeed to be the one having my hair dressed by another. I quite hated it.

When I was primped for the day, Helen fixed her eyes on the floor. "I will go get your breakfast tray."

My chin pulled back in surprise. "I am to eat here?"

"Yes, my lady. The captain wished you to have the day to yourself. He encourages you to reflect on your life before as well as the new life that lies before you."

"Oh." Part of me rejoiced at the prospect. An entire day when I would not be forced to be in the captain's presence sounded wonderful. But after Helen left and the silence set in, I realized how insidious such an edict was. If I were to try to leave, I was positive that I would not be allowed. This was Huckley's way of showing his power over me.

And it worked. I had nothing to occupy me except for the meals that were brought. There were no books in my room, no embroidery to be done, no paper to write on. I had nothing but my own thoughts, which spiraled into deeper and darker depths as the hours passed. I resorted to telling myself stories as I drew faint patterns in the rug. Story after story about a band of lost boys led by a boy who refused to grow up, who wanted nothing but adventure and to defeat the evil captain.

I awoke the next morning, dreading the prospect of another solitary day and yet terrified of what else the captain might have in store for me.

Helen again helped me into a gown that felt heavy and restricting, doing my hair even more prettily than the day before. "You are to partake of your morning meal in the dining room with the captain," she said.

Obedying such a summons contradicted my every instinct, but between my need to escape the prison of my room and the captain's very real threat of moving up the day of our marriage, I could not risk displeasing him. I *needed* these two weeks. I needed time to find a way out of this.

I descended the stairs, dragging my feet on purpose, prolonging the moment when I would have to occupy the same room as he. But eventually I arrived at the dining room and entered to find Captain Huckley standing by the far window, a letter in hand.

I remained hovering in the doorway, taking the opportunity to observe him without him watching me in return. I did my best to assess him objectively. Calculating quickly, I realized he was forty-five years old. He was tall, with a strong chin, and his hair was starting to gray at the temples. He was only a little rounded at the middle, and he carried himself with confidence. He was considered handsome and I wondered for a strange moment if I might have found him attractive if I didn't know any more about him, but realized I couldn't imagine myself outside the situation enough to even guess what my response might have been. He would always be the man who'd seen me at fourteen years old and decided to buy me from my family. I was like a pretty, exotic horse. One he would no doubt take pains to break.

My breath stuttered when I next tried to breathe in, and that small sound caught his attention. He turned to look at me, his eyes taking me in, from my coiffed hair, to the bodice of my dress which hugged my shape, and down the length of my skirts. I cringed when the sight of me made him smile.

"Well," he said, sauntering toward me. "I did well in choosing your gowns, did I not?"

I didn't say a word. It was all I could do simply to not run away.

"Come." He held out a hand and I could do nothing but set my own fingers in his and allow him to lead me to the table. "Let us enjoy our first true meal together."

I sat in the chair he offered. I ate the food. I listened to him blather. I managed to answer with a nod here and a few words there.

"Now," he said, reaching over to toy with my fingers. "As delightful as this has been, I'm afraid I must leave you for the present and go about my duties. They've been a bit neglected the past several days, you understand." His look was chastising, like a parent admonishing a recalcitrant child. His meaning was clear. He had not attended to his duties because he'd been forced to come after me.

Fortunately, he left to go about his business without any more false niceties or unwelcome attempts at affection. I wiped the fingers he'd been touching on a napkin, trying to rid my skin of the feeling.

My fortune continued when he left me to my own devices for lunch, not requiring my presence until dinner was served.

I spent the majority of my day exploring the house, trying to get a feel for the layout so that if a chance to leave presented itself, I would at least know which way to go. Captain Huckley employed enough guards to have one stationed at each exit I encountered. I tried not to linger at the doors that led to the outside, instead taking note of them in just a glance while pretending interest in the painted ceilings and elaborate tapestries that adorned the walls.

I heard the captain's voice echoing from down the hall a few times. I was always grateful for the warning and quick to turn the other way.

I looked out the windows, realizing for the first time that Huckley's house didn't just sit near the Alayan Sea, but directly on it. Water stretched out, endless before me. From my vantage point on the third floor, it appeared that the house sat only a couple minutes' walk from the cliff's edge. There would be no escape in that direction. I would have to take the road that had brought me here.

Continuing through the house, I took note of any decoration that might be used as a weapon. I picked up vases and candlesticks, testing their weight. There were a few actual weapons that adorned the walls, but I knew that any sword would be too heavy for me to wield.

I returned to my room regularly, hopefully giving the impression that I was going to stay put, that I was embracing my new circumstances.

Helen came to my room before the dinner hour, informing me that I needed to change. I blinked. Of course, I knew it was often expected that nobility dress for dinner, but that was usually when guests came. It didn't make sense to dress up for only one other person, but I didn't have a say. So I changed. I let her hang a jeweled necklace around my throat. And I went to dinner, trussed up like a sacrificial offering.

"Ah, there you are," Captain Huckley proclaimed the moment I entered. Then he came to me, taking hold of both my hands and lifting them out to my sides so that he could ogle me up close.

I stood stiff and did my best to breathe evenly. If I were to look at him, I'd likely not be able to resist the urge to snatch my hand away and use it to mark his face with my hand print. Such action would no doubt result in his renewed determination to stamp the life out of me.

He let go of my hands and instead circled around me, making noises of appreciation. A man examining the wares he had purchased and congratulating himself on the acquisition.

I'd never been made to feel so low or so dirty. I was a thing, an ornament he'd polished and planned to display in his window.

"It is long that I have awaited the opportunity to appreciate all the beauty you have to offer." He ran a finger along the gems of the necklace lying at my throat. I didn't know if I could resist the urge to fight back if he continued in this way. His fingers continued to trail along my collarbone and up to my jaw. My fists clenched as I pinched my eyes shut, and just at the moment I felt I would break, he seemed to shake himself from a stupor. "Now." He took my hand and gestured toward the table. "Shall we dine, my angel?"

I felt weak, on the verge of crumbling and worried that I might fall apart right there at the table. So instead I dredged up all the anger I could find. Anger would sustain me. Anger would give me the energy to combat the man sitting across from me. I had to concentrate on that. I had to learn to utilize the anger instead of giving in to the melancholy and despair.

I pulled my back straight and instead of avoiding his gaze, I did my best to hold it, to show strength instead of submission. I listened to his bragging about the house and the servants. He presented each course as though I should be thrilled with each food offering set before me. And I did my best to imagine what it might have been like to have Falstone pound this man into the dirt with his bare fists.

Barbaric of me, I know. And really all it accomplished was making me miss Falstone, and Marilee. Emeline and Beatrice. The life I had cobbled together with nothing but tenacity and my own two hands. It was a life that would never be mine again.

"You know," Captain Huckleby said, interrupting my thoughts. "I do not mind if you speak up on occasion." We were reaching the end of the meal, and he invited me to speak now? "Conversation should go both ways, no?"

I was positive this man would not wish to hear any of my opinions. "I find I have nothing to say at present." I was proud I had found something to say that wasn't a blatant insult.

He studied me as he leaned back in his chair, rolling his wine glass back and forth in his hand. "I suppose there is something to be said for appreciating the quiet." He rose and crossed to my chair, setting his wine glass on the table before kneeling beside me.

I kept my eyes on my plate, my fingers gripping my fork even harder.

He toyed with a curl at my temple then ran a finger around the outside of my ear. "Such grace," he said in an awed whisper. "Such loveliness." He leaned in, placing a kiss on my shoulder.

Bile rose in my throat and I started to shake.

He slid a hand around the side of my neck and brushed his thumb against my jaw. "I do love you." His whisper was fierce. "You know that, don't you?"

I had to swallow and I was shaking so much that I could barely get my voice to work. "I'm sorry, but I do not know that."

"Let me show you then." He turned my face toward his, leaning in.

I turned my face away. "Please don't," I pled, bracing against his reaction.

He froze but did not move away. "You are to be my wife."

I waded through my desperate thoughts, willing myself to not use the fork that I clutched in one fist as a weapon, trying to find the words that would convince him to stay away, even just for one more day. If I insulted him, I knew he would punish me for it, or move up the wedding. But if I appealed to whatever small sliver of compassion he had... "But I am not your wife yet. And while you are anxious for this union, I am still adjusting to the idea, and I would ask that you give me time to accept the situation as it must be."

I held my breath, wondering if he would find the humanity to respect my wishes, or if he would prove to be nothing but a savage beast. He lingered, his hand still resting on my neck for several seconds, until finally he pulled back. "Very well," he capitulated. "I will allow you these eleven days to adjust. But once we are married"—he took hold of my chin, pulling my face around so I would look at him—"I expect your full cooperation."

I nodded. It cut at my insides to do so, but I did it. Because my only option was escape. Whether I was able to get away before the marriage or after, I *would* leave. I was not resigned to this. I refused to accept this hell. I'd seen what such a marriage had done to Marilee, and I knew that staying would never make it better. So I would bide my time. I would do my best to keep those eleven days in place so that I could snatch my freedom at the earliest opportunity.

He squeezed my chin just enough that it started to hurt before letting me go and bidding me goodnight.

The moment the dining room doors shut behind him, I shattered. Deep gasping breaths rasped in and out of me and I fought to control the shaking that vibrated through me. I pulled myself together just enough that I was able to stand and walk back to my room.

After Helen had helped me prepare for bed, I climbed under the smooth fabric and sank into the soft bed before allowing myself to come undone. My tears fell and I used my blankets to smother my shuddering sobs. I cried myself to sleep, feeling very much like I was back to being the terrified sixteen-year-old girl who had fled so many years ago. It seemed age had not helped with my terror. Experience did not make my situation more bearable. Would it ever? I refused to find out.

Breakfast the next morning was a quiet affair. Mr. Smeed dropped several letters beside the captain's plate, which he picked up, splitting his focus between reading and eating. When the last letter had been opened, read, and set down again, he took one more noisy slurp of tea and then spoke. "My dear," he said, dabbing at his mouth and studying his pocket watch. "I have given this a good deal of thought, and I feel it would be easiest on you if we do not wait so long before marrying."

My hand dropped to my lap and my face went slack as his words rang in my head. *Not wait so long?* "But the marriage is set for only ten days from now."

His look was pitying. "Yes, and I fear if we wait that long, it will only give you time to become more nervous."

Had this been his ploy all along? To dangle those fourteen days before me and then snatch them away? How could I convince him to keep his word? "I will be honest, Captain. I will be nervous no matter the time." I attempted a nervous smile, hoping to appeal to his compassion, but my panic was rising. "And you promised me that if I came willingly, you would allow me these two weeks. Please"—my voice shook—"please do not go back on your word." I was begging and I hated it. "I have not adjusted to the idea. I am not ready. I can't—"

The pounding of Huckley's fist against the table silenced me. He stood and loomed above me, eyes ablaze. "You are not some child who does not know the ways of the world. Stop playing the innocent. I no longer believe it." The false care and concern were gone. This. This was the real Captain Huckley. "If you had married me ten years ago when the deal was struck, I might have accepted that excuse. I might have taken *pity* on the young girl I had chosen as my bride. But you are fully a woman now, and I find that my patience has been long exhausted."

I trembled in fury as he raged over me.

“Four days from now, you and I *will* be married!” He tossed his napkin to the table with such force that it scattered the remnants of his breakfast and knocked over his goblet. “You should be grateful I’m giving you *that*.” Then he stalked from the room, yelling at servants as he went.

I sat in shock, my chest heaving with breaths that didn’t provide me enough air. I was suffocating, the sobs rising in my throat impossible to choke down. My face crumpled and my hands clutched at my heart as I tried to accept the new reality. This reality with even less hope than I had had before. This reality that stared me in the face with anger and violence.

I didn’t realize until that moment how much I had been counting on those few more days. How much I had believed that some escape, some salvation would present itself. All my hope had been wrapped up in that scrap of time, but the ticking of the clock was speeding up.

Now I sat in my lack of power, remembering all the rumors of the first wife, and the second, and the third.

Were their deaths all just a result of his uncontrollable temper? Had he killed each wife in a fit of passion or jealousy?

No, they couldn’t have been fits of temper. He’d been to sea when his second wife had died. Something more sinister and calculated then? Did he plan their deaths? Revel in them? Did he enjoy frightening them into submission, making them cower and weep before watching the life drain out of them?

The tears came faster. The sobbing became more violent. This was why I hadn’t let myself think of his wives. A forced marriage to a cruel man was terrifying enough without the threat of death close at hand.

“Dry your tears, miss. The captain is coming.”

I looked up, surprised to hear the warning. There was only one person in the room. A footman who stood at the doorway. I was so stunned by his helping me that I didn’t move right away.

“Quickly,” he said with a nervous glance over his shoulder.

I straightened and wiped at my face, grabbing a napkin before standing and walking over to the window so that I could turn my back to the door. I dabbed under my eyes with the napkin and sniffed back my residual tears. I forced air slowly into my lungs and then back out.

I felt more than heard the captain enter, the darkness that surrounded him seeping into the room and hooking around my ankles, ready to drag me down.

“Appreciating the view?” he asked in a voice much more benign than I would have expected from the man who had just screamed in my face.

I cleared my throat, hoping my voice would sound normal when I answered with a simple, “Yes.”

“Good. I hope you will learn to appreciate all your surroundings.”

I nodded without turning to face him. I just wanted him to leave so that I could think clearly. I must find any means of escape as soon as possible.

There was a rustle of papers—apparently he had returned for his letters—and then he granted me my wish, leaving the room without another word.

I allowed my head to fall against the window, exhausted from the effort of trying to hold myself together. I let my eyes rove over the landscape. The tiny stream winding through the property. The manicured hedgerows, with the untamed trees beyond. The road was there.

How far would I have to travel on that road before I would find help? And which way should I go?

I would have to face that problem once I had escaped this house, because despite the difficulties facing me out there, I knew I would not survive if I remained in this house for four more days.

Pulling myself together, I managed to walk without my legs shaking. I was going to go straight up to my room, but as I passed by the footman who had been kind enough to warn me, I had an idea.

My footsteps paused and I looked at him. After a moment he dropped his professional bearing and returned my gaze.

Then I spoke the question to which I was afraid I already knew the answer. “How did the last three mistresses of this house die?”

Pity flooded his eyes, but he didn’t answer me right away. Instead he studied me, his brow furrowed in thought, before finally speaking one sentence to me. “Go far away if you can.”

I spent the next day doing my best to appear as though I was “appreciating my surroundings,” desperate to make Huckleby believe I would comply, haunted by the footman’s warning. If I could play the part for just long enough to find a way out—some escape, some argument he would listen to, some weapon I could wield.

My maid had dressed me in a rose-colored dress I would have deemed beautiful under any other circumstances. I tried to let it remind me to play the part of a lady, a woman resigned to a marriage. So I walked the halls,

feeling like a shadow of myself as I caressed beautiful vases when I wanted to hurl them at the window. I stared at the elaborate portraits hanging in the gallery as I counted in my head, tracking the amount of time between when one set of footsteps passed the door and another came. Huckley seemed to have a rotating sentinel watching me. Guards, footmen, maids. They each seemed to take their turn passing by. I considered asking one of them for help, but the risk felt too great. I needed more time.

I left the gallery and made my way down the grand staircase, gazing up at the chandelier, trying to appear as though I admired it. I wandered into the parlor, picking up decorative pieces and noting the somewhat garish furnishings before moving on to the library. The fireplace in this room was small—too small, it seemed to me, for such a cavernous room. My footsteps echoed. The library at Sutton Manor was cozy with deep armchairs and heavy rugs. This library was stark and cold by comparison. The seating seemed to deter visitors instead of inviting them. Books took up only three of the walls. The wall with the fireplace in it had the same shelves as the other walls, but these shelves held an assortment of trinkets. I stepped closer, studying the odd collection. An ornate hairbrush. A half-empty bottle of perfume. Ladies' silk gloves. Another hairbrush.

My brow furrowed, realizing there were three distinct groupings, each containing a similar arrangement of items. I stepped closer. There was a lock of hair resting beside the hairbrush in the first grouping. A ribbon was tied around the perfume bottle of the second grouping, and a necklace lay draped over the gloves in the third group.

My lungs seized.

No...surely this wasn't—

I squeeze my eyes shut. Three displays. Three wives.

My entire body started to quiver as the horror of what I was looking at smashed through my chest and ricocheted in my limbs. These weren't tokens of love.

They were *trophies*.

My fingers curled into the fabric of my skirt, trying to maintain purchase on my sanity as my heart raced and my brow began to sweat. My skin felt tight and my lungs wheezed.

The telltale footsteps of another servant checking up on me sounded a few moments later and it was all I could do to quiet my breathing enough

that it wouldn't sound suspicious. My eyes had fixed on the thick lock of dark brown hair that lay on the shelf. I couldn't seem to look away.

"I see you've found my memorial."

The air that hissed in through my nose would have been all too audible if Huckley's echoing footsteps had not started making their way toward me. I forced my fingers to unclench and did my best to even my breathing.

I wanted to throw up.

"Hopefully such sentimentality does not bother you," he said as he came to stand by my side. "I did care for them. They each had my heart in their own way, but that does not mean I cannot give my heart fully to you. You know that, don't you?" His hand brushed the back of my arm.

I nodded, hoping the gesture didn't look as panicked as it felt.

"Good," he said in a hushed tone. "I know this transition has been difficult, but I hope you can feel my devotion. Loyalty means *everything* to me. You must understand that if I don't have your devotion—if you are not committed to this union—you and I will have great difficulty."

I nodded again, knowing that if I opened my mouth I was likely to let out a keening wail.

"Good. That's good." He took my hand in his, giving it a pat. "Because I'm afraid I must put that loyalty to the test for both of us. There is some urgent business I must see to in Caldo. It's not terribly far, but it will require me to leave straight away, and I won't return until tomorrow evening."

A shiver of relief ran through me.

He noticed and used his finger to tip my chin up, forcing me to look at him. "Now, don't fret," he said, apparently misinterpreting my relief for dismay. "We will have a full day to prepare for the wedding after I've returned. And I promise to hurry back as quickly as I can."

I convinced my mouth to form some semblance of a smile, hoping the gesture would satisfy him and hurry him on his way.

Instead he smiled and his eyes narrowed in interest. "That's my Wendolyn. My darling." He tilted my chin up further, slowly lowering his mouth down to mine.

Frozen in fear, I didn't move. I didn't pull away as he pressed his lips to mine. And I nearly collapsed in relief when he pulled back after only a moment and dropped his hand from my chin, leaving me staring in wide-eyed horror.

“Until tomorrow, my dear.” He stepped back and was on his way, leaving me standing in front of all that was left of his previous wives. Trinkets of beauty collecting dust.

I lost track of time. Somehow my shaking legs kept me standing as my mind whirled. I’d always known Huckley had killed his wives. Or I’d believed it at least. But now with the footman’s warning, and these macabre collections of their things, it seemed confirmed, and somehow that made a difference.

It made everything worse.

And yet nothing was worse. I tried to tell myself it was the same as it had always been. Huckley was immoral, manipulative, violent and disgusting—a murderer.

And I had to find a way out.

I gathered my strength and made my way up to my room. I needed a moment. Just a few moments behind closed doors so that I could think. I needed this nightmare to end. I shut my door with fingers that barely functioned and crossed to the vanity that sat along one wall. I was unsurprised but still horrified when I saw each item lying out for my use.

The beautiful, ornate hairbrush.

A bottle of perfume.

And a pair of silk gloves.

They each sat there amid the hair pins, the jewelry box and the lace.

My legs buckled and I crumpled to the ground. My breathing was too fast and my arms felt heavy.

I told myself it would be fine. I would find a way out. I would claw my way through the stone walls themselves if that was what it took. I closed my eyes and imagined myself as a fierce warrior. Maybe even a dragon. I could transform myself into a fire-breathing monster and burn this whole house to the ground. Or I could turn into something small. A mouse scurrying along the walls until I made it outside. An insect that could simply fly out the window.

Yes. That’s what I wished for. I wanted to fly.

Falstone’s words and smile drifted into my mind, but I immediately pushed them aside. I could not think on him. Being in this house was awful enough without dwelling on all that I had lost.

When the lunch hour arrived, I barely managed a few bites of my meal. Even though Huckley’s hasty departure had lifted some of my mental

burden, the rest continued to press down on me with such force that I was ready to bend.

Still, I put on my mental armor, tried to arrange my face into an expression of something other than horror, and continued my examination of the house. The drawing room was sparsely furnished and looked neglected, which struck me as odd after all the captain's talk about making a fine house for me.

I found myself sinking down into a dusty chair, somehow more comfortable in this room than the others, likely because it didn't feel like Captain Huckleby had been here recently. I allowed myself to sit and breathe for a few minutes, until the door creaked open and Mr. Smeed entered.

My limbs stiffened.

He bowed. "Lady Wendolyn. Can I get anything for you?"

"No, thank you."

"Very good. Then might I show you to a different room more suited to you?"

I swallowed my scoff. This was the most comfortable room I had found, but of course none of the staff would see it that way. So I stood. "Yes, thank you."

He gestured for me to precede him out the door and then led me to the parlor. I sat and thanked him, but instead of leaving straight away, he gave me a haughty lift of his brow. "Perhaps I could ask the housekeeper to join you so that you might start familiarizing yourself with the house and its running." His tone wreaked of condescension. "After all, you will be the lady of the house very soon."

I felt the blood drain from my face, but managed a nod. "Yes, of course, that's an excellent suggestion."

"Very good, my lady." He bowed his head and left.

I did my best to brace myself for the task of conversing with someone who expected me to act as though I had any sort of vested interest in the running of this household.

The housekeeper wasn't a terror, but she didn't offer any sympathy either. She was cold, aloof and efficient. She would be no help to me, which was unsurprising. I suspected the warning of the footman was the extent of the help I would receive from the staff. I couldn't very well go around asking

for help without knowing who to trust. No doubt such action would result in the captain insisting we be married the moment he arrived home.

By the time I was expected in the dining room for dinner, the knot in my stomach was so tight that I felt ill. It could have been hunger, but I suspected it had much more to do with dread. Still, I sat politely by myself at the table and did my best to observe all the social niceties. If the servants could report back to the captain that I was docile and cooperative, then perhaps he would stop forcing them to dog my heels.

After dinner, I was so wrung out from pretending that I claimed a headache and went to bed early.

But I couldn't sleep. How could anyone be expected to sleep under such circumstances? I gave up after a time, realizing that the walls felt as though they were pressing in on me, shrinking my space and stealing my air. I had to get outside.

I left my room, swathed in a blue nightdress that had been laid out for me by Helen. I was halfway to the stairs when I realized I should have put on a dressing gown. Such things simply weren't second nature anymore. I'd been a servant for too long, and I decided I didn't care.

Even when one of the guards fell into step behind me, I couldn't find the energy to care. Perhaps such dishabille would even make him believe I was comfortable here, that I was ready to be *loyal* to the captain.

I could hope.

My foot was just touching the bottom step when the guard finally spoke. "Can I be of assistance, my lady?"

I almost said no, before remembering that I was trying to act resigned. So I turned and faced him. "Yes. I need some fresh air. Perhaps you might show me the best view of the sea?"

The guard studied me silently for several heartbeats before nodding his head. "Of course, my lady. This way."

The feeling of being a prisoner increased as he took hold of my elbow, leading me to the doors at the back of the house, nodding to the guard stationed beside the exit.

The second guard opened the door to allow us through and then fell into step on my other side.

"Thank you," I said, gently pulling my arm from the man's grip. Fortunately, he let me go.

My steps were quick as I stepped through a small garden and then out into the long, wild grass that stretched out to the cliff's edge. The sound of the waves beckoned me forward and the wind increased with each step I took. Even with the captain's guards following behind me, the cleansing effect of the breeze pushing at my hair and whipping through my nightdress was profound. I didn't go all the way out to the edge, but stopped close enough to admire the great expanse of the Alayan Sea resting beneath the bright moon. I breathed and I closed my eyes, and I let my imagination run free. I held my arms out to my sides, raised my face to the wind and rose up on my toes, imagining that I was a bird in flight, using the harsh breeze to carry me away. A bird could not be forced to marry.

A bird had a beak that could peck and claws that could scratch.

16

After being escorted back to my room, I spend much of the night reprimanding myself for wasting time. I could no longer afford to wait and hope that Huckley wouldn't let his guard down. I had to get ready to go at the first possible moment. I spent the morning going through the jewelry the captain had given me, trying to decide what I could take with me to sell or trade. I wished I had my old clothing since blending in as a commoner would be so much easier. But all my clothing from my old life had disappeared the night I'd arrived. It had likely become fuel for a fire, so I didn't harbor any hope of getting it back.

Perhaps a maid might be willing to give me something...but I had nothing to trade, and no way to know who was loyal to the captain and who might be sympathetic to my cause. And even if they were willing and able to help me, the retribution they would face was an unacceptable sacrifice. I was on my own.

I'd simply have to deal with the clothing situation once I was gone. Get away first. Then worry about the rest. I'd steal something if it came to that.

After I'd taken my midday meal, I explored the house more. Now that I'd been out of my room at night once, would the guards be less vigilant if I left the house again? It was certainly worth finding out. And I needed more practice navigating the house in the dark. A middle-of-the-night escape seemed like my best and most likely option. If I could manage to leave my room without the guards noticing...perhaps I could slip into the parlor and break a window to climb through. Hope rose up at that thought, but I tried to push it down. I could not allow my hope to make me reckless.

I would leave my room tonight, prepared for both options. A simple stroll around the house to practice navigating in the dark, or a desperate bid for freedom.

But once I was free of the house, where would I go?

I spent the next hour being trailed by a guard as I *strolled* around the grounds, trying to memorize the path to the stables, the drive that led to the road, possible routes through the trees. There was no escaping behind the house. As I'd seen very well the night before, there was nothing but a large yard and then a sheer drop to the ocean below.

By the time it was the hour to dress for dinner, my plan was fixed firmly in my mind. I knew which dress and cloak I would wear. I knew which jewels I would steal. I was about to become a criminal, but that was better than being dead.

Helen was waiting for me, an emerald-green gown in hand. "The captain has returned and is anxious for you to join him for dinner." I did my best not to shrink at the news. I had hoped he would not return until after dinner, or perhaps even be delayed. Of course I did not have that kind of fortune. So I allowed her to lace me into the gown, and did not allow my eyes to stray to the vanity, where the perfume bottle sat like an omen and the hairbrush looked too much like a weapon.

Once I'd been primped and puffed, I traversed the stairs with equal parts trepidation and confidence. The trepidation stemmed from all I'd seen and heard that confirmed my suspicions—Huckley had killed his other wives. The confidence was born of sheer stubbornness and a will to live.

Captain Huckley was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, tucking his pocket watch away. Seeing him there, scrutinizing my every move, almost made me stumble. I tightened my grip on the banister and focused my eyes on the stairs before me.

"Good evening, Lady Wendolyn," he said as I traversed the final step.

"Good evening, Captain," I managed to say without choking.

"Have you found yourself more resigned to your current situation? Can I count on your loyalty?"

I gathered all the anger and courage about me, looked him in the eye and told the greatest lie I'd ever spoken. "Yes, Captain."

The grin that spread over his face was more disconcerting than any expression I'd seen on his face yet. "Good girl." He tilted my chin up with one finger and pressed another kiss to my mouth before sweeping a hand toward the dining room. "Our supper awaits."

I forced my feet to walk along beside him. I was disgusted by the lingering feeling of his lips on mine but also grateful that it had only been a peck on the mouth instead of anything more.

Tonight. I would do my best to leave tonight. One more dinner with this man, and a few hours of restless nervousness and then I could leave, disappear into the night.

Hopefully.

At the table, I allowed him to push my chair under me. He circled the table to take up his seat across from me, and just as a footman was draping a napkin across my lap, one of the guards opened the door. He hurried in and bent to whisper in Captain Huckley's ear.

The captain dropped his utensils and turned to the soldier, incensed. "Take care of him," he spat.

This time, the soldier's words were just loud enough for me to overhear. "He's got a magistrate with him, sir."

Huckley pushed to his feet, steel glinting in his eye. "Stall them. For as long as possible. You!" He shouted to the footman standing against the wall. "Stand outside the door and make certain that no one enters."

The soldier and footman both bowed and then scurried away, closing the door behind them.

Captain Huckley went to a cabinet in the corner of the room, which I had assumed held dishes. Instead he threw the doors open and pulled out a sword.

My mind finally caught up with the situation. Captain Huckley ready to do battle. A magistrate here in the house.

I burst from my chair and ran for the door, taking hold of the knob. But it wouldn't turn. Locked. I pounded on it instead, screaming, "I'm in here! I'm—"

Huckley's massive hand clamped over my mouth, dragging me away from the door. "Did you really think it would be that easy?" he snarled in my ear before hauling me away from my escape. He flung me back toward the table. I stumbled and landed in a heap.

I tried to push myself up, but Huckley was now hovering over me, the sword pointed at my chest, fire in his eyes. "I thought you were resigned, my dear."

There was no point pretending anymore. I let all my animosity run rampant across my face as I shouted, "I will NEVER be resigned!"

He had the audacity to chuckle. "You silly women," he mocked. "You're all the same. Always thinking you have a say in the matter." He sheathed his sword, giving me one glimmer of hope before he pulled a knife from his

boot. He kept the knife pointed at me as he stooped down and hauled me to my feet. “Time to go, Wendolyn, darling.”

I pulled back, digging in my heels, resisting all that I could, but he dragged me across the room, his fingers bruising my arm.

I couldn’t figure out where he was going; there was no door over here.

He pulled aside a large tapestry. I don’t know why I’d never before considered hidden doors or passageways. Why hadn’t that been part of my reconnaissance? They were common in large houses such as this, so why had I not considered? If I had found one, I might have been gone already!

Huckley yanked me with him right up to the door, ignoring the way I pried at his fingers. Then he placed the hilt of his knife between his teeth as he dug a key from the pouch on his belt and fitted it inside the lock. The door swung open and he pulled me into the darkness beyond, shutting the door firmly behind us.

It was pitch black, but Huckley must have navigated this passage many times before, because he didn’t slow.

I kept my free arm in front of my face, worried that my head would go careening into a stone wall if I didn’t prevent it.

“One thing you should know about me, darling,” Huckley hissed from the darkness. “I always have a way out, and I always win.”

“Even if you have to kill to get what you want?”

“Yes,” he said with a chilling calm. “Even then.”

“You killed your other wives.” I just wanted him to admit it so that I could stop wondering altogether.

“Not my first wife,” he said, giving my arm another hard yank. “She truly did die in childbirth. Too weak to accomplish the most *basic* of feminine tasks.”

His disdain for a woman who died trying to give him a child cut at my insides, but I forced my mind to the next question. “And the second?”

“Do you know why I spent nearly ten years searching for you?” he asked as he rounded a corner and I stumbled after him.

“I would dearly love to know.”

“Because it’s the hunt that I enjoy. The anticipation.” I could hear it in his voice—the love, the devotion he had for this subject. “I realized it with my first wife. The moment we were wed, I lost interest. There was no *challenge* anymore.”

I gaped in shock, trying to find the words to respond when Huckley came to an abrupt halt. He grabbed hold of both of my arms, pushing me back until my shoulder blades and head hit the wall. I cried out in pain.

“Hush, you,” he admonished.

The noise of ripping fabric rent the air just before he grabbed my hands, forcing them together and binding them. I wondered for a few seconds where he’d gotten the fabric. Did he have lengths of fabric on him at all times, waiting for a victim to subdue? But then I recognized the feel of the fabric. A napkin from the dining room.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said, desperate as I realized that my situation, against all odds, was becoming even worse.

He just scoffed. “Yes, because you’ve been so very *docile* during the length of our acquaintance.”

I needed a different angle. I needed to reason with him in a way he would understand. “If you know there will be no challenge after you marry, then why marry at all? You found me after all these years. You’ve forced me into your home. You’ve won. Why not let me go and hunt someone else? Find another challenge.”

“Because then I wouldn’t *win*. I can only win if I have you and no one else does. There must be fidelity in marriage. It’s why I decided to rid myself of my second wife, after all. She’d found another. I saw the way she looked at him, the way he looked at her, and it was unacceptable.”

I blinked into the darkness as shock crashed into me. “You killed her... for a look?” I had wanted to know, wanted the truth. But somehow the truth was worse than I’d let myself believe.

“She could not be allowed to stray. I may be many things, but unfaithful is not one of them.” He tied the knot tight, causing the fabric to cut into my skin.

A moment later, the other half of the napkin was forced between my teeth, then he tied it behind my head as I struggled in vain to push him away.

The moment he had finished gagging me, I heard the scrape of a key in a lock and then a door right beside me swung out, revealing the starry sky and the expanse of lawn and shrubbery pushing out toward the cliff. We had exited the back of the house.

I cried out the best I could, hoping to alert the magistrate and whoever it was that Huckley so desperately wanted to escape, but Huckley just

clamped his hand over my mouth and dragged me toward the cliffs.

We were halfway there when our destination came to the forefront of my mind. *Why the cliffs? Why the cliffs?*

Realization hit and I threw my weight back, digging in my heels even as I tried to drop to the ground. He obviously viewed whoever was at the house as someone who would take me away from him, and he'd said only moments ago that if he couldn't have me...no one could.

He was going to throw me over the cliff.

I was about to become just one more dead woman in Captain Huckley's life.

My fight only made him pause long enough to slap me across the face and then throw me over his shoulder.

The blow to my head was hard enough that it took me precious seconds to clear the fuzz from my brain. Then I pounded on his back. I jerked and squirmed, but he had one arm secured around my waist where it rested on his shoulder, and his other arm wrapped around my knees as he jogged toward the cliff. His shoulder punching into my stomach with each step weakened me further, and the wind coming off the sea chilled my tears as they gathered in my eyes. I did my best to kick at him but I didn't have the right angle.

As the wind increased and the roar of the crashing waves grew to a crescendo, I knew the moment was at hand and I fisted my hands into the fabric of his coat, determined that if I were going into the ocean, I would drag him with me.

There was the sensation of falling for the barest portion of a moment before his shoulder dug into my abdomen again. The sensation repeated over and over until I opened my eyes and realized that he was traversing a rough stairway that had been cut into the side of the cliffs.

Relief and confusion stole my air and I blinked away the spots that dotted my vision. He wasn't going to throw me over the cliffs; instead he was taking me down to the water.

But why?

I pulled my head up just enough to look around at the gray shapes of rock and water. The path Huckley traversed was not wide. The cliff face rose up, jagged and raw on one side, then sheered off to nothing but open space on the other.

If I fought, if I tried to free myself right now, I would end up dashed on the rocks below.

I went limp, resigned to do nothing until my situation was less precarious.

I thought through my situation, my options. My hands were bound together, dangling in front of me, resting against Huckle's back. The binding was tight, making my hands throb with my pulse.

The fabric in my mouth was not as tight. In fact...I curled my arms up, wedging my fingers beneath the fabric that pressed against my cheek and pulled, prying it from my mouth and pulling it below my chin. I took a deep breath, making a decision.

I had to hope that getting information was my best defense at the moment. "What will you do with me now, Captain?" I asked.

His steps stuttered, but he kept going, choosing not to answer. He didn't seem concerned that I could speak freely now, which left me even more frightened and befuddled.

My words were abrupt and warbled as I fought to breathe while his shoulder consistently knocked the wind out of me. "Clearly someone knows that I do not belong with you. You are the one being hunted now."

"I've been prey before, and as I said, I always win."

"But where can you hide? There is nothing below us but deep ocean."

He let out a winded guffaw. "You think I had these stairs painstakingly carved into these cliffs so I could go down and enjoy the sandy beaches? No, my beauty. You forget I am a merchant and a captain. Our escape floats on that deep ocean you spoke of."

I raised my head, looking over the waters, taking in the reflection of the moonlight as it glinted off the waves and lit up the white canvas of six sails lashed to three great masts.

The captain's ship was here, anchored in the inlet.

I closed my eyes, trying not to let defeat claim me, searching for a different avenue, any means of redemption.

In desperation I filled my lungs as much as I could and then let out a blood-curdling scream.

The captain dropped me to my feet in front of him, then took my arms firmly in hand and turned so that my back faced the edge of the cliff. He forced me back, danger burning in his eyes as my feet slid back over the dirt until my heels no longer touched the earth.

I gasped and trembled, reaching out and clutching at the front of his coat, pleading, “No! Please don’t do this. Please!”

My toes pressed to the earth, desperate for purchase as he pushed just a little harder. I was leaning back, supported only by his hands that held me and the precarious balance of my toes.

Then he stopped pushing, letting me feel the wind snatching at my skirts, hearing the pebbles as they dislodged beneath my feet and skittered down the cliff.

He pushed just a little more and I cried out, the sound cutting off as he abruptly pulled me toward him, capturing me in his grasp. I stood trembling and frozen, sobbing as he stroked my hair.

“Make no mistake,” he whispered in my ear. “Those that hunt me may catch up with me eventually, but it won’t be soon enough to save you.” He grabbed hold of my arm and pulled me down the stairs.

It took all my concentration just to keep my knees from collapsing as I stumbled after him, sobs still wracking my body. I fought to control myself, needing my vision clear so that I could step carefully, so that I could see and plan and *do something!!*

My breathing was shaky, but I sucked in and blew out steadily, forcing my body to conform to my will. I shook the tears from my eyes, looking down at the beach below and up to the clifftop above. We were more than halfway down the rugged staircase and once I stepped onto the ship, my options would diminish dramatically.

So I did my best to slow him down while quietly gathering my strength. I could only hope that my potential rescuers would have time to discover where Huckley had taken me. Once we reached the bottom of the stairs and I no longer ran the risk of falling to my death, I would fight with all I had.

Perhaps I was too quiet over the next few minutes. Perhaps I was too acquiescent. Perhaps he was smart enough to suspect I’d take any chance to get away from him.

Either way, we were five stairs from the bottom when he adjusted our positions. He brought me in front of him, curling one arm loosely around my neck as he pulled his knife out again, positioning it close to my throat.

The strength I had gathered drained from my limbs.

“I love the ocean,” Huckley effused as he eased us down the last few steps. “The raw power. The disregard for anything in its path. The ocean

bends to the will of no man. And my ship allows me to harness that power, to work *with* it.”

His words might have been poetic if I didn’t know of his sinister intent.

We stepped out onto the sand, moving toward the dock that had a rowboat rocking alongside it.

“My ship,” the captain continued. “The ocean. The stars. It’s a spectacular view, isn’t it?”

I remained silent.

“That star there,” he said, pointing somewhere to the midwest with his knife. “I’ve named that star Janella, after my first wife.” He pointed again. “That one is Suzette.” He moved his finger again. “And that’s Lilianna.”

I swallowed, even more unnerved by the fact that he would immortalize his dead wives as stars—as if it was some sort of honor.

“You see that bright star?” he asked, pointing again with his knife. “The brightest in the sky?”

“The North Star?” I asked, my words slathered in bitterness, rage and fear.

“Yes,” he said in whispered awe. “You see the second star to the right of it?”

I spared a glance to the sky. “What of it?”

He turned his face into the crook of my neck, breathing me in. “That’s the star I’ll name for you after you’re gone.”

I jerked away from him, but he moved the knife back to my throat. I stilled, seething in fury. “And how long will that be?” I bit out.

“Not to worry.” He used the cold blade to caress my cheek. “We will marry first. Come now.” He picked up his pace, forcing us across the sand and rocks.

“So how will you kill me?” I asked, trying to sound brave and defiant while I shook all over. “Have you decided yet? I know your second wife died in a carriage accident, perhaps you’ll try that again? Or do you prefer a variety?” I swallowed, trying to keep the hysteria out of my voice. “How did you kill her anyway? It’s said that you were gone on a voyage when it happened.” I tripped over a rock, but he held me rigidly against him.

“That was easy enough to arrange. I am not a fool, after all. If a second wife died, and me without an alibi, I knew there would be suspicion. So I had Smeed damage the axle enough that it was bound to break on its own.”

Saints and angels, he was admitting he had killed his wives.

“And the third?”

“I had to be patient with Lilianna. Suzette had survived less than a year. I was anxious to select my next quarry, but I had to mitigate the risk of suspicion.”

We stepped up onto the dock, each step drawing us closer to a ship that could take me anywhere, away from everything I knew, everyone I loved.

“So I chose a poison that would accumulate in her system. I told her it was medicine, meant to make her better. It appeared to everyone as though she sickened, slowly worsening before wasting away—back to dust.”

My stomach roiled at the thought of his depravity.

“And then I saw you, and you were perfect. Just a bit too young. But that worked in my favor. I couldn’t remarry again too soon, after all. Instead I had the delicious anticipation of waiting for you to grow up.” He stopped beside the rowboat, pulling his arm from around my neck and taking hold of my arm instead. “Now, get in.”

I planted my feet. I would not go willingly.

His eyes narrowed as he saw my open defiance. But I swear there was also pleasure in his look. He enjoyed my defiance, because it gave him permission to be cruel.

His fingers tightened and he brought his face closer to mine. “Or shall I push you in the water and see how long you last with your hands bound and that lovely heavy gown pulling you to the bottom?”

I wanted to lash out at him, to spit in his face, but his threat sat all too real on my shoulders. Yes, I could swim, but I’d only done so in ponds and streams. And never in the layers of heavy fabric that wrapped my body now, and certainly not with my hands tied. I’d never had reason to fear drowning before.

I feared it now.

He gave a little shove and I did as he wished. I stepped into the rowboat. He quickly clambered in after me, pushing off right away and sparing just a moment to check his blasted pocket watch before taking the oars in hand with expert skill.

Though I trembled with fear and cold, I did my best to sit upright as tears coursed silently down my cheeks. With each stroke of the oars through the water, I was drawn further from salvation.

As Huckley's arms worked to pull us across the swells, I kept casting my eyes about, hoping to see a lantern bobbing on the water, the shadow of another boat, the sound of another set of oars.

And I did. My eyes would see the glint of a lantern only to realize it was nothing but moonlight. Time and time again my ears tricked me into believing I heard something, but when I would look, there was nothing there.

We bumped up against the side of the ship and Huckley pulled the oars into the boat as he nodded toward the ladder. "Up you go."

I stared at him for a moment, then presented my bound hands to him.

He sneered. "You can climb with them tied."

"I don't see how. And even if it were technically possible, you tied them so tightly that I no longer have any feeling in my hands." I continued to stare at him, my hands raised between us, trying my best to allow apathy to take over.

My calm seemed to frustrate him, but he finally yanked my hands toward him, snarling as he savagely cut through the fabric.

Looking at my wrists, I was surprised to see that he'd avoided cutting them. I curled and extended my fingers, grateful when the sharp pins and needles sensation pricked at my skin. I continued to shake and flex them, rubbing at my sore and chafed wrists.

"Get on board, Wendolyn," Huckley said after a few minutes, his tone inviting no more delays.

I looked up at the ladder—slats of wood strung between two ropes. I'd never seen such a thing. It did not look sturdy in the least, but I stood carefully and reached for it, wrapping my still slightly numb hands around the rungs.

It was slow going. It took multiple tries with each step to get a foothold without my dress getting underfoot. The ladder wobbled and shook, made

worse by my trembling limbs and the rocking of the ship. The effort it took me to scale the ladder must have been obvious, because Huckley never prodded me or yelled at me to move along.

When at last I wrapped my arm over the railing of the ship and pulled myself over, my strength was spent. I collapsed to the deck, my breath heaving as I reveled in the feel of solid wood below my cheek and hands.

Huckley's heavy boots hit the deck beside me and I closed my eyes in the vain hope that if I ignored him, he would ignore me.

Instead he latched on to my waist and pulled me to my feet. "Come, let's get you settled."

My hands were free and my fury and indignation rose up, preventing acquiescence. I turned and lashed out at him, pounding on his chest and scraping my nails against his neck. "I won't be another dim star in the sky!"

My attack was short-lived as he quickly gained control of my hands and then pushed me until my lower back hit the railing. The wood dug into my back as he leaned his weight into me, his face contorted in rage hovering so close that I could have counted his pores. He huffed like an agitated horse and I did my best to throw all my anger at him even as the pain in my back begged me to relent.

"If you're trying to make me end your life early," he said with a sinister tip of his head. "It won't work. I take too much satisfaction in a carefully executed plan to ruin it by giving in to a fit of passion." He yanked me away from the rails and threw me to the ground, but I had no chance to recover before he grabbed my shoulders, dragging me back until I sat against the mainmast. Then he grabbed a piece of rope and tied my hands once more, this time tethering me with my hands above my head, attached to the rigging above.

He squatted down so that he could be at eye level and gave me a smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me—"

I kicked out at him, but he just slammed his hand down on my lower leg to prevent any more movement.

"As I was saying. If you will excuse me, I have a ship to prepare." He walked away and I struggled against my bonds, but nothing budged. Instead I had to watch as the captain came continually in and out of my view, untying and retying and hoisting on ropes. It was disturbing to see the calm surety that settled on his shoulders as he went about the work.

At one point I thought I heard the murmur of voices as if someone else had climbed aboard, but I never saw anyone else. Huckley must be talking to himself, acting like the deranged madman that he was.

Eventually he appeared again just behind me and I suddenly felt my arms pull free as he cut my bonds. I let out a cry as the blood suddenly surged back into my hands and arms.

“Stings, doesn’t it?” he commented.

This time my furious kick found its target, hitting his knee with as much force as I could manage.

With a cry of outrage, he unsheathed his sword, aiming it at me where I lay on the wooden boards, propped up on my elbows.

The sound of another pair of boots hitting the deck arrested both of our attention. It might have been anyone there in the dim moonlight, but despite the deep shadows, I recognized him at once.

Falstone stood at the other end of the long deck, right beside the railing. He stepped forward into a swath of moonlight and the look on his face when he saw me sprawled on the floor with Huckley standing over me would have terrified me if I didn’t know him so well.

Huckley, however, was rightly terrified and immediately turned to face Falstone, his sword held in front of him. “Not another step!”

But Falstone was entirely undeterred. He took three long strides across the planks, his face a mask of fury, his sword raised. His arm slashed down, the sound of metal on metal breaking the silence on the water. The force of the blow knocked Huckley off balance, sending him stumbling to the side. I rolled away from him, scrambling until I was able to grab hold of the railing and pull myself to my feet.

Falstone and Huckley were facing off, Falstone walking clockwise, forcing the captain to do the same, which effectively put Falstone between Huckley and me.

And suddenly I could breathe again.

“Insufferable whelp!” Huckley spat.

“You’ve lost, Captain.” Falstone’s words were measured, but I could hear the hum of restraint running through his voice. Only years of training kept him from attacking in a maelstrom of rage.

“I never lose!” Huckley had no such control and came at Falstone like a man possessed.

I flinched with every sword clash but couldn't look away. Falstone fended off each blow, but his moves were purely defensive. He never attacked. I wondered what he was waiting for. The right opening? Reinforcements?

I flexed and rubbed my hands, desperate to get full feeling back. I hated being defenseless and useless.

Huckley tried to circle around, but Falstone never gave up his position, always keeping his body between mine and Huckley's. Despite the fact that I'd moved position, he seemed to know exactly where I was. The captain fell back several steps, air huffing from his lungs like a bull ready to charge.

Once my hands were working normally again, I searched frantically among the barrels, coiled rope and folded sails piled beside me, triumphant when I found a long, narrow, broken piece of wood, about the length of my forearm. Perhaps an old plank that had split down the middle. I wrapped both hands around it and held it down in front of me, wanting to be prepared but inconspicuous.

"It's over, Huckley," Falstone warned. "The magistrate is on his way. We know it was all a lie."

"I won't give her up!" Huckley shouted.

"The choice isn't yours," Falstone stated.

Huckley charged again. He brought his sword down in three punishing blows, but on the third, Falstone heaved him away, leaving Huckley to stumble back, barely keeping his balance.

He was not deterred. If anything, the captain attacked with even more ferocity, his eyes strangely cutting in my direction several times instead of staying on his target. His distraction allowed Falstone's blade to come close enough to his chest that it caught on the chain of his pocket watch, sending it flying across the deck with a clatter as it broke into pieces. The captain took one more vicious slash at Falstone's abdomen before retreating once more and yelling, "Take her, Smeed!"

Smeed?

I had only enough time to recognize the name before an arm circled my neck from behind and the cold caress of a blade once again touched my throat.

I cried out.

Falstone kept his blade toward Huckley but turned to see what had caused my distress. He immediately readjusted his position so that he had

both Captain Huckley and me in his view.

I managed to latch on to Smeed's wrist, doing my best to push his knife hand away from my throat, but I didn't have the strength or the leverage, so I looked to Falstone, waiting for him to act.

Falstone stood there, his jaw hardened, his fist clenching and unclenching at his side while his other hand held the sword aloft.

"I'm afraid you've been beaten, soldier," Huckley declared with labored breath. "And I'm going to have to ask you to leave." The last words were spoken through his teeth as he bared them.

Falstone's eyes kept flitting from Huckley's face to the tip of the knife poised at my neck and back again. I was so used to Falstone's decisive movements that his hesitation left me confused. Did he not know what to do? How could that be? How could Falstone, with all his control and observation, not have a plan?

His panicked eyes flitted to me again and suddenly I knew why. It was me. He was so distracted by my plight that all his other instincts had fled. He'd told me months ago that the reason he was able to do his job effectively was because he wouldn't be leaving anyone behind if he failed. That wasn't the case anymore. I would be left behind.

"Drop your weapon, soldier," Huckley said as he slid one step closer to my position. "Or are you willing to see her blood splattered across the deck of my ship?" His eyes glinted with wicked pleasure.

My breath pulsed in and out in desperate breaths. The power was shifting too quickly. If Falstone surrendered his weapon, it would be over. Captain Huckley would kill him, I was sure of it.

It was up to me. I had to act.

I remembered the jagged piece of wood in my hand. I had to use it. Now.

Using the hand that was wrapped around Smeed's wrist, I pushed against his arm, inching the blade away from my throat. My other hand tightened around the piece of wood where it rested at my side, then thrust it behind me as hard as I could, jabbing it into Smeed's upper thigh.

It was a foolhardy move. Maybe even idiotic. Likely to get me killed. But the moment the pointy, splintered wood cut into Smeed's flesh, his strangle hold on me loosened and I was able to stumble away from him, a cry of desperation and fear tearing at my throat as I launched myself in Falstone's direction.

He was there in the next moment, sweeping me behind him, where I gratefully plastered myself to his back, peering over his shoulder at Huckley, who looked about to explode, so great was his rage.

Huckley breathed hard, but his blustering fury morphed strangely into a chuckle and a grin as Smeed limped forward. "I do love a challenge." He took one step forward.

"Don't be a fool," Falstone warned.

"Even if you take her now, I'll find her again. She's mine *by law*, and I will go to any lengths to reclaim her."

My heart sank. All the hope I'd collected since Falstone stepped onto the ship suddenly quivered. "He's right," I whispered from behind his shoulder, my joy and my relief crumbling. I had no hope that the law would believe me over Huckley. "If they still believe he has a claim on me—"

"He doesn't," Falstone said, his voice strong, his stance unwavering. "The magistrate and I have spent the past two days at your uncle's home."

I noted the way Huckley's face went slack at this pronouncement.

Falstone continued, "Since Captain Huckley here was so intent on following the contract with exactness, I wanted to be sure that he had done just that. After all, the terms stated that the monies agreed upon would be received by your uncle on the day your wedding was supposed to take place. That deadline passed more than nine years ago, and your uncle has not received one. Single. Piece. Of silver."

The captain had not paid. *He had not paid!* That meant...that meant... "The contract is void?" I asked in an awed whisper.

"Quite."

The bit of glee and bravado Huckley had been luxuriating in a moment before was gone, leaving him incensed. He stared at Falstone with hate and vengeance burning in his eyes. Then his eyes fell to me. "You belong to me," he declared in a menacing whisper. "You will ALWAYS belong to me!"

"I BELONG TO NO ONE!" I screamed as I lunged at him, anger taking hold of my limbs as I tried to launch myself at him, but Falstone caught me around my waist and held me back. "NO ONE OWNS ME! NO ONE!"

"Then no one else will!" Huckley raised his sword and ran at us.

My eyes widened in horror, but before I could even think to act, Falstone pulled me aside, stepped forward and swung his own blade with both hands in a swift, decisive arc.

Huckley's battle cry turned to a scream of horror as his weapon fell to the ground—along with his hand, which had been severed from his arm.

I fell back against the railing in horror, a hand pressed to my mouth as Huckley fell to his knees.

Falstone turned on Smeed, but the man threw his knife to the ground before Falstone even issued a threat.

"Now," Falstone said, and I could hear both the relief and the shock in his voice. "You." He pointed to Smeed. "Get a thin strip of that canvas and tie it as tightly as you can around your master's wrist so that he doesn't bleed out on his own ship."

Smeed did so, being careful to move deliberately, as if he didn't want to spook Falstone.

Captain Huckley continued to glare at us, even as his pale face contorted and he breathed through his teeth. Smeed did as he was told, doing his best to cut off the flow of blood.

As for myself, I refused to look in the direction of the hand that lay on the planks of the deck.

The sound of men clambering brought my attention to the railing of the ship. I looked over to see six men climbing out of a boat and hauling themselves up the ladder. My grip on Falstone's arm convulsed.

"It's all right," he said with a deep sigh. "It's the magistrate."

As soon as they stepped on board, the magistrate and his men made quick work of taking the situation in hand, as well as searching the ship to be sure that no one else was on board.

Falstone was finally able to sheath his sword and wrap me in his arms. "Let's go," he said. "We will leave him to his fate. He cannot touch us now." He led me past the magistrate, who nodded in camaraderie, and was helping me over the railing when Huckley started screaming behind us.

"Thief!" Huckley's shrill word sounded behind us. We turned to look at him where he stood between two men, each holding tight to one of his upper arms, allowing him to cradle the stump of his wrist against his chest. His face was drenched in sweat and mottled gray as he shook from anger and pain. "Ungrateful wench! You are stealing that gown and those jewels. They do not belong to you. Thief!"

I glared, wanting to ignore him entirely and leave without a backward glance.

"Ignore him," Falstone encouraged, echoing my own sentiments.

But I paused. They did belong to Huckley, no matter that he had supposedly gifted them to me. And the last thing I wanted was to give him a reason to accuse me of anything else, or to track me down, or manipulate the law in his favor. I wanted to be done with him. Utterly finished. So I stepped back to the deck and unlatched the necklace, throwing it at his feet. Then I reached to my back and pulled at the laces of the gown.

“Cecily,” Falstone said with uncertainty.

“Just help me! I don’t want his filthy clothing. I want nothing from him! Nothing!”

In a trice, Falstone had pulled out a knife and cut the laces. I pulled the gown away from my chemise and stays and let it fall to the deck, stepping out of it and kicking it away. Strangely enough, the men holding Huckley appeared impressed instead of scandalized and the magistrate gave me a nod. Falstone wrapped a coat around my shoulders, which I quickly realized was his own, and we turned back to the railing.

“You’ll get her home safely?” the magistrate asked.

“You have my word” was Falstone’s response as he assisted me over the side.

I had a much easier time climbing down than I’d had climbing up.

After stepping into the boat, I nearly collapsed onto the bench, wrapping the coat firmly around me as Falstone took the oars in hand and pushed us away from the ship.

Away from Captain Huckley.

Away from a forced marriage.

Away from a short life of incomprehensible misery.

I was away from him. The captain truly had no more claim on me. He could not force me to go back. He could not force me to marry him.

Sitting on the seat of the boat, I swayed, dizzy with relief, my head swimming and my heart hesitant to believe in my freedom. I felt a bone-deep need to cry—or maybe scream—and yet I didn't have the energy for either. I sat there, shaking against the bite of the sea breeze and the turmoil of fear, relief, shock, joy, and horror that battled inside me.

"Cecily?" Falstone said after several minutes, his voice quiet and gentle even as he rowed hard and fast, his arm and chest muscles obvious as they contracted beneath his shirt.

Looking into his eyes was a comfort, but it brought up many questions. "How are you here?" My voice was weak.

His expression collapsed into compassion and fear. He swallowed. "I couldn't leave you to your fate. Nor could the princess or Sir James. We set off for Norsing right away, and once the magistrate and I discovered the captain's fraud and gathered evidence, I knew he had no right to keep you, so there was nothing preventing me from coming after you."

"But..." I thought through the evening's events. More questions. "What about the ship? How did you know I was there? Where did you get this boat?"

"There was a footman who told us all about the passages. Everything. He told us about the stairs in the cliff side, the ship. He knew the captain only kept one rowboat at the dock in the inlet. It was his assurance of escape. The rest were further down the coast. As soon as he told us where they were, I went to find it. I knew I didn't have time to spare."

A tear rolled down my cheek. It was probably the same footman who'd warned me. I lapsed back into silence, still shaking.

"Cecily?" He said again. "Are you hurt?"

I blinked, having to think about it. *Was I?* I did a mental assessment of my body. “I don’t think so.”

He kept giving me worried looks, which were understandable. I was in a bad way. Teetering on the edge of sanity. “He killed them,” I said into the silence as I stared out at the water. “He killed his wives.”

I could feel his gaze on my face. “He admitted it?”

I nodded, managing only the tiniest bobbing of my head. “He told me how...” My words were a haunted whisper. “The first was an accident, but the other two...” I turned to look at him. “He killed two of his wives.” My mouth quivered as my body began to shake more violently. “He would have killed me, Falstone.”

The helplessness and compassion in his eyes were at odds with the furious rowing he was doing. Then I felt the boat run aground, and suddenly his desperate rowing made sense. He’d been determined to get us to shore with as much speed as he could muster.

He jumped out and pulled the boat further onto shore before climbing back in to assist me.

I expected him to offer a hand or an arm. Instead he just lifted me from the seat and carried me onto land, cradled in his arms. I wrapped my arms around his neck, clutching desperately, praying that holding on to him would help me hold my composure.

“My horse is right here,” he reassured me. “We can leave right now. But I’d like to get you some clothes. Perhaps back at the house—”

“No!” I held on even more fiercely. “I won’t go back there. I won’t go back.”

“All right,” he shushed. “We’ll just go. I’ll get you away from here.”

I held my breath, trying to keep the panic at bay, shoving away all the feelings that roiled just below the surface.

“Here. Up you go.” He lifted me up onto his horse, having to pry my hands from around his neck to do so, then climbed up swiftly behind me. He wrapped one arm securely around my waist and took control of the reins with the other, heeling the horse into motion.

The hard ride and the constant wind blowing over my face did nothing to make the shaking stop. If anything, the loud silence of wind and hoofbeats gave me too much space to remember everything and the trembling only worsened.

Falstone's arm tightened around my waist. "Cecily?" he said, his voice tinged with panic as he pulled the horse to a stop, then leaned forward, trying to look at my face.

"Yes?" Even that small word shook.

"Are you all right?"

My eyes darted to his and all I could do was shake my head.

Falstone abruptly dismounted then pulled me from the horse, setting me carefully on my feet, where my knees threatened to collapse beneath me.

He bent so that we were eye to eye. "Are you cold?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

"We need to keep moving," he said, moving his head to catch my eye again when my gaze drifted away. "We need to get you someplace warm. You need better clothing. We need to get you home, but I'm worried about you."

My knees gave out.

Falstone had already been half supporting me, so he tightened his grip and sank with me to the ground so that I was cradled in his arms.

"It's all right," he insisted, but his voice did not sound confident. "This is normal. I've seen it before, after battle. Sometimes there's euphoria after victory, and when that wears off, the shaking starts. Just focus on me."

I curled into him, desperate for him to hold me together when I felt like I was going to fly apart. I didn't want to think of all that had happened. I didn't want to wade through the fear and damage that still clung to me like a second skin.

Instead it all seemed to well up, making me tremble even more, my mouth opening in pain and terror, and then finally letting out a keening cry.

"I know," Falstone murmured in my ear. "I know, love. It was awful. It was terrifying."

I cried a long time. Sometimes wailing, sometimes weeping in silence. But by the end of it, I was so wrung out that the trembling was gone entirely, leaving me limp and numb and wanting nothing but sleep.

I'd soaked the handkerchief he'd stuffed into my hand somewhere along the way. Now I just lay against him, sniffing, the salty stain of tears covering my face and neck.

He rocked back and forth with me in his arms for another minute or two before pulling back to look in my eyes as he pushed the hair from my face. "Shall we go?"

I blinked up at him with wide eyes and managed to nod.

He helped me stand, continuing to look me over as if checking to be sure I didn't dissolve into tears again. "I suppose crying was the answer then?" he asked with the smallest smile.

I chuckled a bit even as my heart swelled. He was so very kind and his concern was so obvious that my heart seemed to reach out and latch on to him.

And then my arms reached out and latched on to him. I slid a hand behind his head, raised up on my toes and brought his lips to press against mine, letting myself sink into the sensation. He didn't kiss me back immediately—I had probably shocked him—but then he responded hungrily.

His hands fell to my waist and then paused for just a moment—seeming to remember that the short coat of a soldier was hardly a substitute for proper clothing—before wrapping his hands fully around my back and pulling me in, as if he'd decided he didn't care. Just like I didn't care. Because this man had just delivered me from a hellish existence as the wife of Captain Huckley, and the only thing I wanted to do was kiss him.

He kissed me in return for several long moments before trying to pull back. "Cecily, love. We should go."

"But I think you should kiss me now."

He chuckled even as I pressed my mouth to his. "We need to get somewhere safe."

"I feel safe here," I insisted, coming back to his mouth again and again. "This is my Never Kingdom. It's lovely here. We should stay."

He let me kiss him once more before taking my wrists in hand and gently pushing me away. "It's getting darker and colder." He ran his fingers through my hair, relief and concern emanating from him. "And while I'd be happy to kiss you forever, we do need to think about the next logical step."

Yes. He was right, of course. Captain Huckley was no longer in pursuit, but we were a full day's journey from home with no supplies. Plus, the magistrate would likely be using this road to haul Captain Huckley off to prison soon, and I was determined not to be anywhere near that man ever again.

I nodded my assent.

He glanced down at the open front of his coat that hung on my shoulders, revealing my chemise and stays. He tugged it closed. "We need to get you

more suitable clothing.”

It was difficult for me to worry about propriety and reputations now that I’d been freed from the captain. “If someone asks, we’ll say we were attacked by brigands who left us with nothing but our horse.”

His smile was sweetly sad. “You were always good at making up stories.”

“My tales of Walstone were my best.” I let myself fall forward against his chest, exhaustion washing through me. “I just want to go home.”

He rubbed my back and my arms. “Personally, I preferred the tales that were about you.”

I smiled into his chest. “You could tell which ones were about me?”

“Not at first, but after hearing about your life, I put some things together.”

“Hmm. I suppose I’m not as clever as I hoped.”

He chuckled into my hair. “You’re the cleverest. My clever girl.” He pulled back and bent to boost me up onto the horse.

I shook my head. “We’ll go faster if you’re in front.”

He looked unconvinced.

“I’ll be fine. I promise to stay on.”

He reluctantly agreed and mounted before reaching down and pulling me up behind him. I wrapped my arms around his chest and he took one of my hands in his, raising it to his lips before urging the horse onward.

I wanted nothing more than to go straight home, but the journey would take hours and the sun had set long ago. I felt Falstone sigh. “Cecily?”

“Yes?” I asked from my spot sitting behind him with my face buried in his shoulder.

“I cannot in good conscience ride with you through the night, especially when you are wearing so little.”

“What shall we do?”

“As soon as I find an inn, I am hoping to negotiate either for a room to sleep in or a carriage that you can ride inside. But either option I fear will leave your reputation marred. You will be showing up in a public place in the company of a man, in only your undergarments.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I murmured into his back. “I’m a servant. Few will care and none will know me. Besides, we were attacked by brigands, remember?”

“You’re not just a servant. As a member of the noble class—”

I lifted my head, pulling on his shoulder to make him turn and look at me. “You think I’m clinging to some fanciful idea that I will find myself back in the ranks of nobility?”

“Why not?”

“Because the only thing that position ever afforded me was misery,” I answered, incredulous. “You just had to save me from a forced marriage to a man who wished me to reclaim my noble status. There was nothing and no one that I left behind when I went into service. I promise you, Falstone, I don’t want it.” I burrowed back into his shoulder, pressing into his back for warmth. “But I am getting cold,” I admitted.

“Hold on.” Falstone nudged the horse into a gallop and less than an hour later, we came upon an inn.

We must have been quite a sight. Me wrapped in Falstone’s short coat and clearly lacking a proper skirt. Falstone with no coat at all. The innkeeper looked at us askance, but Falstone explained that we were a newly married couple, unfortunate enough to be attacked by bandits. The innkeeper looked skeptical, but he capitulated, leading us to a room.

One room. For the both of us to share.

Falstone quickly lit a fire as I stood there, unsure what to do next. He finished with the fire and turned to see me wide-eyed and stuck to the floor. “I need to see to the horse. I’ll return in a few minutes?” The question was in his voice as well as on his face. He wasn’t sure I’d be all right.

I nodded. “Go ahead. I will be well.”

He looked at me for one more moment of indecision then left the room.

I took advantage of the privacy to ready for bed, grateful for the bowl of warm water the innkeeper’s wife had provided for us so that I could wash the day away. If only dirt was the single lingering stain.

Falstone returned to find me perched on the edge of the bed, huddled in his coat as I stared at the fire, exhausted but terrified to close my eyes.

His smile was warm and commiserating, likely fully aware of my fragility. “Get some sleep,” Falstone said, his voice gruff as he nodded toward the pillow. Then he sat down on the floor, obviously planning to sleep there.

I didn’t want him to sleep there. I wanted him to sleep beside me, but of course that was brazen and terrible of me to think such a thing. But I thought it anyway, because the last thing I wanted was to sleep by myself in a strange bed after the days I had just endured. But despite my kissing him

so willingly on the road here, I did have some sense of propriety, and I knew him too well to think that he would take the bed. So I resigned myself to him sleeping on the floor.

“Here.” I removed the coat from my shoulders. “At least take your coat and put it under your head,” I said, tossing it to him. There was so much more I wished to say, but our unconventional situation left me timid and unsure. So I simply climbed beneath the thin blanket and turned to the wall, desperate for sleep to overtake me but fearing what the darkness would bring.

I couldn’t wake up. I was whimpering, crying out, trying to escape the darkness of a dream too real. A hand took hold of my arm and I jerked awake.

“Shh,” Falstone hushed. “It’s just me.” He knelt beside the bed and laid the upper half of his body on the mattress, his head settling next to mine as he wrapped an arm around my waist. “I cannot bear to hear your cries anymore, so forgive me, but I am going to sleep here so that you know you are safe.”

I let out a deep sigh of relief and fell immediately back to sleep.

Sunlight was streaming into the dingy inn room when I awoke. Alone. I panicked for a moment until I saw Falstone's coat draped over a chair. He must have stepped out for a moment. To check on his horse or arrange for a carriage or something.

While he was gone, I took care of my personal needs then splashed water on my face and wrapped myself in Falstone's coat so that I could maintain a bit of decency when he returned. I sat on the bed and tried to comb my fingers through my hair. It was a lost cause, but I kept at it anyway, simply for something to do as my mind churned through the previous day's events.

The captain's insistence that we move up the wedding. Being dragged through the secret passage. Thinking he would toss me over the cliff. The ship. The clash of swords. The captain's hand just...lying there on the deck of his ship.

I refocused my thoughts on what had been said. Falstone had gone to Norsing, to my uncle's home. What had that been like? Was my mother there?

And why did that question hurt me?

Pushing that thought aside, I did my best to focus on the memory of Falstone appearing there on the deck. His powerful presence and the instant sense of safety and hope he'd provided.

He was truly magnificent, a man in every sense of the word.

There was a light knock on the door and I stiffened before realizing that anyone with ill intent would not knock.

"Yes?" I called, my voice shaking only slightly.

"It is I," Falstone called back.

"Come in."

He entered and the moment his gaze met mine, a blush stained his cheeks. Which of course made a blush rise to my own face.

He cleared his throat and offered me a large bundle of fabric, which turned out to be a cloak and a dress.

“Thank you,” I breathed in relief, immediately shucking off his coat so that I could throw the dress over my head.

I froze when I realized that Falstone was staring at me, wide-eyed. Our eyes locked for an uncomfortable moment before he turned his back to me.

Did he find my behavior abhorrent? I hoped not. It was just so difficult to care about all the rules of propriety and modesty when my practical side knew we had higher priorities to deal with. I unfroze and made quick work of putting the dress over my shoulders and then doing up the laces across my abdomen and chest. Then I threw the cloak on for good measure, immersing myself in the fabric. “I’m decent,” I announced.

He turned around, glancing over the new clothing and giving me a small smile.

His appraisal made me feel the indecency of the situation, even though I was now fully covered. “I’m sorry for the shocking impropriety of—”

My words cut off when he stepped forward and wrapped me in his arms. “Don’t apologize to me. You’ve been through enough. You don’t owe me anything.”

“But you seem...embarrassed...by me...” I mumble into his chest.

“No, not at all. I’m just trying to be respectful. You deserve that. And after”—he swallowed—“after my rather forward action with you in the middle of the night, I didn’t want—”

I squeezed him tighter. “I was glad you were there,” I admitted, though it took all my courage.

“You were?”

“Yes. It made me feel safe. And I haven’t”—I swallowed—“felt safe in quite a while.”

He let out a shaky breath. “Good.” He pulled back. “You *are* safe with me,” he said with conviction. “Shall we go home now?”

I nodded.

We ate a small breakfast provided by the innkeeper, and when we went outside, I discovered that Falstone had procured a horse for me.

I was relieved to have control of my own horse, knowing that I would be more comfortable and that we could travel much faster. However, there was a small part of me that would miss being able to burrow into his back as we rode.

As we maneuvered our mounts out of the inn yard, I had to ask, “You went to Norsing?”

He looked over at me, his eyes concerned. “Yes.”

“Did you...see my mother?” I studied his face, waiting for any clue about what he might have found. Was my mother destitute? Thriving? Living life as if she’d never had a daughter?

Falstone gave me a tiny sad smile, the grief and regret on his face hitting me in the chest, knocking the breath out of me.

I choked on my lack of air as my eyes pricked. “She’s dead, isn’t she?”

“I’m sorry, Cecily.”

I blinked and pressed my lips together. “When?” I asked.

“Six years ago.”

I nodded as I tried to absorb the information. I would never see my mother again. The chance to ask her all my questions or make her take responsibility was gone. Any answers I longed for had died with her. Answers about her love for me. Answers about my father and the truth about his actions, his arrest. “All right.” I nudged my horse into a trot, setting the pace for our return home, happy that the task of riding was mindless as my head and heart churned with sadness, regret and anger.

“Cecily,” Falstone called over the sound of our horses’ hoofbeats some time later.

I slowed to a walk and he followed suit. “Yes?”

“There is more that I learned in Norsing.”

My chest tightened. I’d known in the back of my mind that there would be more I should know. He’d conducted an investigation in the house I’d lived in for seven years, and in the town where I’d been born. He’d found out about my mother. He’d discovered what had happened between Huckley and my uncle. Of course there would be more I should know. My entire childhood was in Norsing; all of my family had resided there. He’d found out about my mother.

Did he know about my father?

Did I *want* to know if he did?

I kept my eyes on the road ahead. “Tell me.”

“Your father—”

My head snapped in his direction. Though I’d thought it just a moment ago, I hadn’t truly expected my father to be the person he had news of. I’d

imagined him languishing in a prison cell for so many years that the thought of him being anywhere else was jarring.

“Your father came to your uncle’s house only two years after you disappeared.”

“He...came back?” *He wasn’t in jail or executed?*

Falstone nodded. “One of the servants there remembered well the encounter. He’d come back looking for you and your mother. The charges of treason had not been proven, so he’d been released several years before. However, his properties were never returned to him because the duke never believed his innocence. So he had to build his life anew.”

“Alone?” I asked as a betrayal I didn’t know I could feel settled over me.

“He felt it best to leave you in the care of your uncle until he had a home and stability to offer you, but it had taken time.”

“He came back for my mother and me?”

Falstone nodded.

“Did my mother go with him?”

He shook his head. “You were gone. And when he discovered the circumstances of the marriage contract, your disappearance and presumed death...he could not forgive your mother for it. And your mother didn’t seem inclined to trust him either. It had been too long. Too much had changed. They fought. Eventually your father left.”

“Left where?”

He shook his head. “The servant didn’t know. He thought perhaps he went in search of you, or perhaps he just went back to the life he’d built to mourn your death. I asked the magistrate to make inquiries. Perhaps he can be found.”

A tear coursed down my cheek and I could do nothing but force air in and out of my lungs for several long moments. “My father is alive and free?”

“Yes.”

“And he is not a traitor?”

“It seems not.”

“And he came back for me?” The last few words were a lament as my face crumpled and I squeezed my eyes shut, bowing my head as tears streamed down my face.

The horse continued moving without my guidance and Falstone didn’t say anything as the world I thought I knew broke and rearranged itself around me. I’d lived for so many years believing that both of my parents

had betrayed me or given me away. Trying to believe that my father had been falsely accused and that he'd stayed away only long enough to build a life that we could return to...that thought broke my heart and healed it all at once. I mourned the life that had been stolen from me and found hope in the idea that somewhere in the world was a father who still cared for me. Whether he was truly innocent or not, he had come back for me.

My weeping subsided, leaving the skin over my cheeks feeling stiff and my throat aching. The emotional turmoil of Falstone's revelation only added to my exhaustion. I was not used to riding for any extended length of time, so despite our frequent stops, the pain at the backs of my legs was severe by late morning and we still had several hours to go.

"Cecily?"

I looked over to Falstone, trying not to look as though I were in pain.

It was clear from the pity on his face that I hadn't succeeded. "Do we need to stop for a while?"

I shook my head. "I just want to get there as soon as possible. Then I'll avoid all horses for at least a week."

He looked about to argue, but instead he just turned forward, his brow furrowed in concern. "I should have found a carriage," he murmured.

Love for this caring man swelled up inside me and I did my best to swallow down the tears of pain and frustration. He did not need the extra burden of seeing me in pain.

A few miles later, a carriage approached from the opposite direction, so we moved to the side of the road and waited for it to pass. But instead of rolling by, it pulled to a stop.

The door burst open, and a woman swathed in bright colors jumped down without assistance. The moment I recognized Marilee, I dissolved into tears of relief. I was blinded by my weeping and didn't realize that Falstone had dismounted until his hands were at my waist, urging me from the horse. I fell eagerly into his arms, letting Marilee's fretting questions and Falstone's calm answers float around me as they helped me into the carriage.

The cushioned seat was heaven, the back support sublime.

"Rest," Falstone advised.

I finally focused on his face. "Aren't you coming?" I asked.

"I need to stay with the horses. I'll be riding right behind."

But I didn't want him riding behind. I wanted him riding inside with me where I could lean into his side and share in his calm. Yet all I could do was

nod and let him go.

Sir James climbed into the carriage and shut the door as Marilee sat beside me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and leaning her head against mine. “Did Falstone get there in time?” Fear made her voice tremble. “Did Huckley hurt you?”

In so many ways...yes. But that wasn’t what she was asking. “Falstone has impeccable timing. And incredible skill with the sword.”

Marilee let out a shuddering sigh of relief. “I wanted to come after you right away, but the magistrate said we’d only make it worse. It was Falstone’s idea to go to Norsing and investigate the situation further. We set out as soon as we received word from him about what they had found.”

“Thank you for coming for me.” I let out a sigh, appreciating the gentle rolling movement beneath me and the lack of friction against the back of my legs. “I like your carriage.”

Marilee chuckled, which made me smile. It felt good to smile.

20

When we arrived at Sutton Manor, I straightened, preparing to walk my exhausted body into the house and up to my room.

But the moment the carriage door opened, Falstone's broad shoulders crowded inside. He reached in, scooping me off the bench and pulling me from the carriage.

"I could walk," I protested half-heartedly.

"Let me do this for you," he begged. "Please."

I relaxed. "If you insist," I said, and let my head rest on his shoulder. "Thank you for coming to get me, Falstone."

"I always will."

My brow furrowed as he climbed the steps and entered the house. It was such a monumental thing to say, but he seemed sincere. "You will?" My question came out in a whisper.

"If you'll let me."

I raised my head so I could examine his profile while he climbed the stairs. I wanted to ask what he meant—if he was suggesting that perhaps we would be together always, but I was too worn down and unsure to broach that subject. So instead I settled my head back on his shoulder. "I would," I said, and we left it at that—a promise of an undefined *something* between us.

As he ascended up to the servants' wing, I wondered where Marilee had gone, but that question was answered when we neared my chamber and both Marilee and Emeline came hurrying around the corner from the opposite direction.

I was about to ask Falstone to set me down, but he did so without my prompting, leaving me free to catch Emeline as she fell into my arms, clinging to me with such desperation that I nearly started weeping again. This girl had the biggest, most tender heart.

"All is well, Em. I'm here and I'm safe."

The tremble in her voice was obvious even though it was muffled by my clothing as she asked, "Will he return?"

No one had to ask whom she referred to.

I swallowed hard, but Falstone answered for me. "No, the magistrate will make sure of that."

Emeline and I both exhaled in relief. It was good to hear those words and the conviction with which he spoke them. I let it shore up my belief that they were true.

"Come," Marilee said. "You need to rest, Cecily."

I allowed both women to flank me and escort me into my small chamber, glancing back to take another look at Falstone and whisper, "Thank you."

He rested a hand over his heart and bowed his head in response.

Over the next few days, Beatrice, Emeline and Marilee all treated me like glass, waiting for me to break. Perhaps I *was* more fragile, and I was certainly on edge, but their careful handling of me was starting to feel as if it was making things worse, not better.

So it was with utter relief that I came upon Falstone standing in an alcove as I walked down a corridor. His hands were fisted on his hips, his chest puffed out, his chin high as he looked off into the distance. A hero's pose if I ever saw one.

My hero.

I smiled, overcome with gratitude for him. I wrapped my arms around his barrel chest, resting my head over his heart. He melted at my touch, returning my embrace as his chin settled into my hair. "Are you well?" he asked after a moment.

I let out a deep sigh. "I am now."

"I haven't known how much to pry. I want to watch over you like a hawk, but it seems like the women in this house are doing enough of that."

I smiled at his astute observation. "Yes. Please don't turn into a hawk. I've had enough hovering. Tell me about you."

He pulled back and I tilted my face up to look at him.

"I," he said, circling my ears with his fingers, "am grateful every time I see you in these halls." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my mouth. "Every time I hear your voice." Another kiss. "And every time I have a chance to make you smile, which has not been nearly enough lately."

I smiled wide then, easing into the comfort of his presence.

“Is it strange?” he asked after a moment. “Not having to hide or run?”

I nodded. “I’m still adjusting—to many things.” Huckley no longer being a threat. The possibility of my father not being the man I’d come to believe. My willingness to trust Falstone and my desire to build something more with him. My desire—however small—to finally grow up.

“I’m here for anything you need,” he assured me. “But for now, I should probably let you get back to work.”

“Very well,” I agreed before stealing one more kiss and going on my way.

I needed to do more mending, but I couldn’t find a thimble. I had two, but one had disappeared the day Falstone came to speak with me in Marilee’s dressing room (and I suspected he still had it). The other seemed to have been misplaced sometime during my dark adventure at Huckley’s residence.

Mending without one certainly wasn’t the end of the world, but it went so much quicker when I wasn’t worried about stabbing my finger constantly. I could borrow one from the housekeeper or any number of other servants, but I decided to use it as an excuse to track down Falstone.

I found Marilee in the study with Sir James, but they were alone. I checked the kitchen and found Marcus eating and flirting with one of the chambermaids. I decided to let them alone and turned to ask Emeline if she knew where Falstone was, but Emeline was nowhere in sight.

Odd. Emeline was always in the kitchen. She loved it here. Only Diana stood in the kitchen, going through a basket of vegetables.

I turned back to the table. “Marcus?”

He looked up. “Yes?”

“Do you know where I might find Falstone?”

He tipped his head toward the back door. “Out back training.”

I grinned. “Are the children back again?”

“Not today.”

“Oh.” Well then, what kind of training was he doing?

I left the kitchen through the back door, but Falstone wasn’t in the patch of yard he usually occupied when training his small recruits. I set my hands on my hips, twisting my lips to one side in consternation. Where was he?

I walked past the vegetable garden, prepared to circle the house. As I neared the corner of the house, the familiar sound of wooden swords clashing met my ears. Marcus must have been mistaken. I smiled and hurried forward, anxious to see how the young soldiers had improved since last I'd seen them.

My smile dropped and my eyes widened in surprise when I saw Falstone facing off not with any children, but with Emeline.

Emeline?

She had the corner of her skirt tied up enough to give her feet free movement. She held a practice sword in one hand and had a small arm shield strapped to the opposite forearm. The set of her jaw was firm, her eyes focused. I'd never seen her look so fierce. She didn't defend meekly. She was the one attacking, driving him back, using her arm shield to great effect.

No doubt Falstone could have beaten her handily, but it was clear that she had gained significant skill.

I watched in wonder. I was so used to her quiet, meek ways that seeing her thus was shocking. It was also a revelation. I hadn't realized until that moment how much I worried about Emeline's ability to take care of herself, to stand up for herself. The worry that my meek little friend would be trampled by whatever woes life had in store for her dissipated as I watched each slash and thrust. Dear Emeline might be quiet, but there was a warrior in her.

In the next moment, Falstone disarmed her and she stepped back, breathing hard.

He smiled at her. "Don't get overconfident. When you do, you leave yourself vulnerable."

She nodded, pushing a loose lock of hair out of her face.

"Have you had enough for the day?" he asked. "Or shall we take a break and get back to it?"

"Get back to it," she answered before turning away from him, walking toward a water skin that lay in the grass. She picked it up, raising it to her mouth, and caught sight of me. Her cheeks immediately flushed but she said nothing, only taking a drink.

"Cecily."

I turned to Falstone, who looked happy to see me.

“I see you’ve been keeping your most promising recruit a secret,” I commented.

He jogged over to me. “I told her it was up to her who she shared her hobby with.”

I looked past him to where Emeline was fiddling with her waterskin. “I’m very impressed, Emeline. You look like you have a natural talent for it.”

Her cheeks reddened more, but this time she smiled and glanced up at me. “Thank you.”

“You’re right about her talent,” Falstone murmured to me. “I’ve never met someone with so much drive, coupled with focus and humility.”

“How long have you been training her?”

“Several months. She approached me in Dalthia. She’d seen me working with Johnny and asked if I’d show her a thing or two. Of course I was happy to do it, but I thought she’d lose interest after a handful of lessons. I was very wrong.” He took a long drink from his own water skin then turned back to me. “So.” He leaned his shoulder into the wall, looking down into my face with a grin. “I have a break just now.” He dipped his head a little bit, his eyes on my mouth. “What *shall* I do with my time?”

I put a hand to his chest and pulled my face back, stopping his advance. “I’m afraid it’s going to cost you, soldier.”

I expected disappointment, but instead his eyes lit with amusement. “Really? And how much does a kiss from this fair maiden cost?”

“A thimble.”

He tipped his head back and laughed. “What an odd request.”

“More specifically, the thimble you *stole* from me all those weeks ago. I need it back.”

He tilted his head as he looked at me with affection in his eyes and mischief curving his mouth. “And you think I have this bobble?”

I sighed dramatically. “I certainly hope so, because I need to get back to work, and my other one has been misplaced.”

“Very well.” He reached in one of the small pockets of his jacket and pulled his hand out, the thimble balancing on the tip of one finger. “Will this do?”

“Yes,” I said, plucking it from his finger. “Quite nicely, in fact.” Then I rose up and kissed him more thoroughly than perhaps was strictly appropriate with Emeline only a few paces away.

Two days later, as I came out of the morning room with Marilee's tea tray in hand, I caught sight of Falstone standing in the entry. I brightened immediately. He had that effect, making me feel lighter, happier, even though at that moment he wasn't even looking in my direction.

He stood beside a stranger who looked like a gentleman farmer. The man held a broad-brimmed hat in his hands, turning it in a circle as he waited. He glanced up at the sound of my approach and I gave him a small smile before turning my gaze back to Falstone.

Falstone followed the man's gaze and caught my eye, his expression turning suddenly nervous.

"There you are," he said, clearing his throat. "This gentleman would like to have a word with you."

I felt my forehead peak with interest and turned a curious gaze back to the man. "Yes, sir?" I asked with a dipped curtsy.

The man's gaze was intense, searching my features as if looking for something specific. "Cecily?"

My hackles rose. Guests asked me for things often enough, but none knew my name. His scrutiny put me on edge. It was still uncomfortable to have people notice me. And even though I knew I was now safe and free from Huckley, I couldn't help but fall back a step.

"That's what you call yourself now? It's you, isn't it?" he asked, his eyes haunted, like he was afraid to hope but desperate for respite. "But you grew up. Of course you did. It's been fifteen years."

The tray I'd been carrying slipped from my fingers and clattered to the rug beneath my feet. Pottery broke. Tea and pastry spilled. But I ignored it all as my eyes remained wide and glued to the man before me, my breathing quick and shallow as I looked through the grizzled beard that hadn't been there before and tried to decide if my mind was playing tricks on me or if I truly recognized the face buried beneath years of sun-weathered skin.

It couldn't be. Could it?

As I gaped like a fish, trying to force this moment into some semblance of sanity and reason, the man's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm so sorry, my Wendy. For everything."

My lower lip quivered at his use of my nickname, but I was able to form one word. "Papa?"

He nodded, his lips pressed together in hope.

I spared Falstone a glance, simply to have him confirm the truth I already knew. He gave the barest nod and I fixed my eyes back on my father. I fisted my hands in my skirts, then pressed them to my stomach, not knowing what to do with them. Finally I settled them on my hips as I looked away, fighting the sting in my eyes. "Did you do it?" Maybe it was wrong to make that my first question, to demand *that* truth before any other, but I had to know. I turned to look at him. "Were you guilty?"

His face was slack, as though the emotion inside him was too great for any one expression to manifest itself. "Does it matter? The result was the same. Falstone told me what you suffered."

"Yes, it matters!" I burst out, only realizing in that very moment just how much it mattered to me. "You stand before me as either an unfortunate man, an unwitting victim like me, or as the reason for my misery." Feelings of betrayal and abandonment rose up, hot and searing. "You're either the one family member I *might* be able to trust, or you are just one more disappointment. One more parent who put their desires above the needs of their child. So yes, it—"

"I did nothing." His words rang out, strong and confident. "There *was* a faction of men. They wanted to replace the duke. They wanted me to take his place, but I refused. At every turn I refused. I tried to talk them out of it—I thought I had." His frustration and anger leaked into his voice. "I thought their ambitions had been quashed. I had no idea that they'd continued their planning. I had no idea until the magistrate appeared at our home. But please believe me." He swallowed with difficulty. "I would *never* have chosen anything that would put you at risk." With those words he transformed from an unsure gentleman farmer to a fierce protector. "Never. Please believe me."

And I did. Because the memories I had of this man had always been horribly confusing. Those memories were *good*. Happiness, love, caring, safety. That's what memories of my father were wrapped in.

But they had been tainted by the accusations leveled at him. My young mind had melded the accusations and rumors with the real. His arrest had cast doubt and suspicion on every good thought I'd had of my father, and ever since Falstone had told me what he'd discovered in Norsing, I'd been going back over the memories I did have and realized they contained nothing but love and devotion.

He held a hand out, tears running over his cheeks, pleading. "Please believe me. Please."

I crossed the space between us and threw my arms around him, burrowing my head into his shoulder as I transformed into that little girl from so long ago who just wanted her papa. His arms collapsed around me the moment I reached him and we sobbed into each other's shoulders, mourning the life together that we had lost.

It took time—a great many hours—for my father and I to share the details of our lives over the past fifteen years. Marilee happily gave me the day off and the use of her parlor so that my father and I could visit, talking nonstop about his arrest and fight for justice, my years in my uncle's home, my foray into service, the farm he had worked to acquire and build, his belief that I had died, and finally the story of a local lawman locating him and sharing my story. He'd left his home immediately to come and find me.

Sir James and Princess Marilee invited him to stay in one of the guest rooms, and he accepted, though he was clearly uncomfortable with being treated as a guest. I was glad he set his pride aside, because it gave me more time to be with him. Only one day though. His life was dependent on work, and so he could not stay for long.

I walked out to the stables with him, ready (but not at all ready) to bid him farewell. I stroked the horse as he settled the bundle that Emeline had prepared for him into his saddle bag.

"You're sure you won't join me?" he asked, sliding his eyes over to me. "I can't claim that it would be any grander an existence than you have here. And it would be work, no doubt. But I'd dearly love to have you." His eyes were warm and entreating but without expectation. We'd already discussed the idea.

I wrapped an arm around his elbow and laid my head against his shoulder. "Oh, Papa," I sighed. "There is a large part of me that would like nothing more."

“But you’ve built a life here.”

I nodded, sure of my decision but sad nonetheless. “And now that I have you back, we might find time to visit one another. And we’ll certainly write, won’t we?” I raised my head, letting him see in my expression that I meant it.

“Of course.” He smiled, the lines of his face creasing and deepening. His hair was more than half-grayed, so different from the dark mop I remembered from my youth. “It’s Falstone, isn’t it?” he suddenly asked with a wink. “He’s the one you can’t bring yourself to leave.”

I opened my mouth to respond but shut it and dropped my eyes instead as heat climbed my cheeks. “Nothing has been decided.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure that won’t be long in coming. He’s a good man.”

“Yes, he is.”

He looked to the house. “All of these people are...tremendous. I’m relieved to find you surrounded by such people.”

“You barely met them,” I teased.

“It took very little time knowing any of your friends to know your life here will be rich and full. These are good souls you’ve found.”

“I know. I was very lucky.”

He extracted his arm from my grip, wrapping me in his embrace instead. “You’ve grown into an astounding woman, Cecily. And that’s due entirely to your own goodness.”

“Thank you for coming.”

“Goodbye, darling girl.” He kissed the top of my head and then swung up onto his horse. “We will see each other again before too long.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

He gave a wave and a smile of farewell, and then he was gone.

It was a bittersweet parting. Our time had been too short and I would miss him, but I was grateful to have someone to miss.

When my father was out of sight, I went in search of Falstone, eventually finding him near the gardens, piling wooden swords into a bundle. He must have just finished a round of training with his band of warriors. He smiled when he saw me. “Did you see your father off?”

“I did,” I answered, picking up a scattered sword and staff.

“He seems like a good man.”

“I think he really is,” I confessed, still in awe.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I be?”

The look he gave me was a reprimand. “You just found and said goodbye to your father in a matter of two days.”

I examined my head and heart for a moment. “I really think I am. I’m better than I’ve been in many years. Knowing him has given me back the happiness I remember from my childhood.”

“But you didn’t want to join him in the home he’s built?”

I shook my head, a wistful smile curving my lips. “This is the life I’ve built, and this is the life that I want to keep.”

We worked in companionable silence for a while.

“I’ll be training the children again tomorrow,” he said.

I grinned. “Do you mind if I come watch?”

“Not at all. In fact, I was hoping you might be willing to be part of our game.” He raised his brows at me in challenge.

I just held his gaze. “You know how I love games.”

He leaned in, pressing a sweet but searing kiss to my mouth before continuing his work.

The next day, I made sure to have all of my work finished early. It seemed essential that I not miss any of the time that was available for Falstone and I to spend together. It was the strangest thing, but being away from him was starting to be...uncomfortable? Or maybe it was simply that I didn’t like it. I wanted to be where he was, as often as possible.

So I was disappointed when I went out into the yard to find not only a lack of children, but a lack of Falstone as well. I shaded my eyes from the glare of the sun, looking around the yard, tuning my ears for any telltale sound.

Nothing.

I frowned.

Perhaps my frown was their cue, because in that moment, five children came bursting out of the vegetable garden, swords in hand.

“You’re in danger again, fair maiden,” Johnny called.

I laughed. “I have a terrible habit of being in danger. What’s to be done, soldiers?”

“We have to take you to the one place you’ll be safe,” Ansel said as he grabbed my hand and towed me toward the flower garden while the others

formed a perimeter around me.

“And where is that?”

“The Never Kingdom,” Tyson declared.

It seemed Falstone had instructed them well. “We must hurry then,” I said, lifting my skirts so that I could dash into the flower garden.

As expected, Falstone waited for me there. He was a statue again, but instead of a proud, noble stance, he had one hand pressed to his heart and the other reaching forward, a look of desperate entreaty on his face.

“What is this?” I asked the children. “Surely a statue cannot protect me.”

Gretchen pulled on my arm until I crouched and tilted my ear for her to whisper in. “He only unfreezes when you kiss him.” She burst into a fit of giggles, her fingers pressed over her mouth and her shoulders hunched.

I scrunched my nose at her cuteness and chuckled as I turned to statue-Falstone. “Perhaps you are the one in need of rescuing, not me.” I went up on my toes and gave him a chaste peck on the mouth.

He unfroze immediately. “Fair maiden,” he said, sweeping into a bow. “I think perhaps you are ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Ready to join in a lifelong game.”

I took in a small gasp of air. “What kind of game?” I asked, breathless.

His eyes delved into mine, reading them, and as he did his expression softened. “The greatest, most grand adventure you could imagine.” He took a deep breath, looking nervous and hopeful. “A lifetime of putting up with me—as your husband.”

A smile bloomed across my face and I stepped closer to him, taking the edges of his coat in my hands before tilting my face up to look at him.

“Yes.”

A slow grin stole across his face as he slipped a hand around my waist.

“You said yes?”

“I said yes,” I reaffirmed before taking his head in my hands and bringing his mouth down to mine.

He banded his arms around me, practically lifting me off the ground again.

The children whooped and hollered, dancing around us in a circle as we ignored them, happily getting lost in each other.

After several long moments, he pulled back, letting me rest my head against his chest. “I thought you said you’d never marry.”

I grinned. “That’s before I met you.” I looked up at him, probably with stars in my eyes. “And I thought you said you’d never grow up.”

He looked at the children around us. “Who said anything about growing up?” he asked with a grin before returning his lips to my own. “I have every intention of growing *young* together.”

My own smile lit my face as I imagined the adventures that this man would take me on. If anyone could keep me young, it was Porter Falstone.

The End

CLOAKED IN SCARLET

(Little Red Riding Hood Reimagined) **Tales of Winberg: Book Two**

Chapter 1 *Before*

I was banking the kitchen fire for the night when I heard it—a barely audible thump at the back door. I sat back, rubbing the soot from my hands with my apron, and bent my head to listen.

It came again: a dull thud sounding against the thick wood. It was late, past midnight, and I couldn't think of any good reason for someone to be calling at the kitchen door. For a moment I thought perhaps I should fetch a guard or inform the housekeeper, Mrs. Braithwhite. I was only twelve, after all. But then I realized if someone were here to attack, they would hardly go through the trouble of knocking. Plus, I didn't like Mrs. Braithwhite.

A drizzle of rain had started earlier in the evening, and I could still hear the drops shushing against the windows. After hearing yet another thump, I threw my thick braid behind my shoulder and crossed to the door, lifting the latch to ease it open. I peeked out, not really expecting to see anything untoward, but still wary with the late hour and being completely on my own here in the kitchen.

I saw nothing but the black of night until a movement at my feet caught my attention. A lump of fabric rested to the side of the door, and a hand raised as if to give another pitiful tap on the wood. I threw the door open and fell to my knees in the doorway. The lump of fabric was a cloak enshrouding a waif of a girl slumped against the wall in an attempt to stay out of the rain. "Miss?" I pushed her hood back so that I could better see her. "What are you doing here?" Her adolescent face was pale and gaunt, her dark red locks plastered to her cheeks and neck. My heart lurched with pain at the pitiful sight. What had this poor girl been through?

She opened her eyes with some effort and though she looked at me, it seemed as if she didn't really see me. I touched her forehead. "Fever," I murmured to myself. I had to get her inside.

Pulling her wet arm over my shoulder, I wrapped my own arm around her back and hauled her across the threshold before kicking the door shut. She did her best to stand and walk, but she had no strength. It was a good thing she was thin. I was small for my age and couldn't boast any great strength, though I was quite compact due to my years of service.

Once I had her in front of the fire, she lay before it, stiller than she should have been, as I coaxed the coals back to life. "Where did you come from?" I asked, though my mind spun with many more questions. Why had she been wandering so late at night? Did she have a home? I knew I'd never seen her around Bridgefield before, so she certainly didn't work for Master Damian and Princess Marilee.

Perhaps she was from a neighboring estate and had become lost. Though why she would be wandering this late, I could not account for. The only reason I was down here was because Princess Marilee had been having difficulty sleeping and asked for some tea. How fortunate that I had returned to bank the fire when this poor soul collapsed at the back door.

Once the flames were growing, I turned back to the girl. Looking at her face in the firelight, I realized she was not only thin, but young, close to my own age, and her pale face contrasted dramatically with the red of her hair. I put my hands on either side of her face, forcing her to focus on me. "What is your name?"

Her glassy eyes fought to focus on me, her lids blinking slowly. "Miriam," she answered, though her trembling made her voice shake.

"Why are you here, Miriam?" I asked. "Are you lost?"

"Hunter," she said as tears filled her eyes. "I need Hunter."

Hunter? "The footman?"

"My brother." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Please. I don't have anywhere else to go."

My heart squeezed. This poor girl. Her pale skin and nearly skeletal frame spoke of an ongoing illness.

"I'll get him." I stood and ran to the sickroom that was just down the hall. Perhaps I should have tried to get her in there, but it was all I could do just to pull her in from the cold. I grabbed a blanket off of the narrow bed and brought it back to drape over her. "I'll be back."

Grabbing my lantern, I slipped from the kitchen and made my way to the servants' quarters. I wasn't familiar with where each of the servants slept, certainly not the men, but I did know which room was Hunter's. I was far more familiar with Hunter than I should have been. I had noticed him the first day that he came to work at Bridgefield. He was several years older than I was. Sixteen, maybe seventeen. There was something about him—his smile and his kind eyes—that brought a bit of light into this dark house.

The house wasn't actually dark. It only felt that way. There had been a bit of light when Princess Marilee had first arrived after their marriage, but then her light had started to dim. Because of Master Damian. Because of Mrs. Braithwhite. Because of this house.

So Hunter's arrival three months ago had felt like a much-needed breath of fresh air. It was difficult not to be distracted when he was around. I wanted to watch him and soak up his good humor.

My fascination was not reciprocated. In fact, I doubted that Hunter had any idea that I even existed. At least I could do this for him though. The girl in the kitchen was his sister, and she clearly needed him right now.

When I reached his door, I hesitated for just a moment before giving three sharp knocks.

After only a moment, he opened the door with mussed hair and far less clothing than I should have been privy to. It took him several moments to clear the confusion from his eyes. "Yes?"

I shook myself from my momentary stupor. "Your sister" was all I managed to get out.

He was suddenly far more awake. "Miriam is here?"

I nodded. "She's ill." I hoped that would be enough of an explanation. I knew that my few words frustrated some people, but I could never seem to push out more than a few at a time. More words meant more people who could hear me and more opportunities to get into trouble.

He turned away, not bothering to close the door as he grabbed for a pair of trousers and slid them on. "Where?"

"Kitchen," I answered, averting my eyes.

He pushed past me, hurrying down the corridor while still tucking in his shirt.

I hurried to keep up with him since he had not taken the time to light a lamp of his own. We moved swiftly but quietly. Years of service had taught us both to move without drawing attention to

ourselves. Our footsteps whispered across the woven rugs and down the steps leading to the kitchen. Reaching the bottom step, Hunter ran the length of the room and fell to his knees in front of Miriam.

"Miri?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "Hunter. I'm sick. They wouldn't let me work anymore because I'm sick."

"I know, Miri. I know." He picked her up, cradling her in his arms, no doubt getting his own clothing wet with the effort.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"We have to get her back to my room."

"Sickroom?" I gestured toward the hallway.

He shook his head. "She's not employed here. Mrs. Braithwhite would never allow her to be here, much less use the sickroom."

I nodded, knowing he was right. The housekeeper would not bend the rules for Miriam, no matter her plight. Mrs. Braithwhite had been unyielding and unforgiving since I'd come to Bridgefield after my parents died a year ago. Harboring someone who didn't belong would be out of the question.

We retraced our steps, but at a slower pace. I entered his tiny room, holding the lantern aloft as he placed his sister in his own bed. I shut the door behind me, anxious to have Miriam out of sight.

"Why didn't you come to me earlier, Miriam? Or at least send me a message?" His whisper was part desperate worry and part fear of discovery.

"I thought I was getting better. And then when they let me go, I couldn't very well find a messenger." I could see her body already relaxing into the warmth and comfort of the bed, though she continued to quiver with fever.

He sighed. "Last week your fever was gone. When did it return?"

"Today."

"That's why they threw you out?" His voice sharpened with indignation.

She shook her head. "It was after they tossed me out. They had already given me four days to rest, but when I tried to return to my work, I couldn't do it quickly enough. I didn't have the strength." Another bout of tears overtook her. "I truly tried. I really did, but I couldn't haul the buckets of water up the steps. They said I had to go if I couldn't do the work."

"Oh, Miriam," Hunter murmured as he brushed her hair back from her damp head.

"I was going to go into the village, see if I could find some work there, but then I realized the fever was coming back. That's why I started walking here. I knew I didn't have a choice anymore. I'm sorry, Hunter. You shouldn't have to take care of me."

"You're never a bother." He leaned his forehead against hers. "Rest. I'll be back soon." He stood and gestured for me to follow him out into the corridor.

He leaned against the door, closing his eyes for a moment before looking at me. "Please give me some time to sort this out before you inform Mrs. Braithwhite."

I blinked in surprise. "I won't tell."

He looked genuinely confused. "You won't?"

I shook my head. "I'll help."

"Why would you wish to help?"

"You need it," I said, lifting one shoulder. "She needs it."

His brow raised. "I'm surprised you'd be willing to risk your position by stooping to subterfuge."

I smiled to myself, thinking of the times I'd helped Aunt Beatrice get things for Princess Marilee that her husband would not allow.

He took my lack of response in stride and dragged his hand over his face. "I'm certainly in no position to refuse help." He let out an exhausted sigh. "She keeps trying to work before she's fully recovered. What she needs is to rest, but of course no one wants to give a servant a free room while she recovers for possibly weeks."

"She's sick often?"

He gave a solemn nod, his shoulders heavy. "The past six months, it seems as if she's sick more often than she's healthy."

My eyebrows pinched together. "So they threw her out?"

"She hadn't worked there for long, so she didn't get a chance to prove her worth before she fell ill."

I chewed on my lip, then asked, "Your parents?"

"Long gone."

I swallowed, absorbing the hard facts, then looked at him, waiting for him to ask something of me. I could be useful. I could if he'd just give me a chance.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair, then pulled on a handful before looking to me again. "Can you get food? I'm sure she needs to eat and drink."

I nodded.

"We'll need rags and water to keep her fever down." He hooked a hand around the back of his neck, trying to think like a nursemaid when he was just a brother who cared. "Her clothes are wet and dirty, but I don't know where I would get a clean night dress for her."

"I have one."

The shock on his face was almost comical. "Are you certain?"

I nodded again.

He looked a bit bewildered, his head shaking back and forth. "I don't even know your name."

I tried not to let that bother me and simply answered, "Emeline."

"Emeline. I don't know how to thank you."

I looked away, embarrassed. "It's nothing."

He didn't reply, and when I convinced myself to look up at him, a ghost of a smile flitted across his mouth.

I took a deep breath. "I'll...be back." With the food and the nightdress, but, "You can get rags and water?"

He gave a firm nod and we both went about our designated tasks.

I returned with one of my nightdresses draped over my arm and a bowl of warm broth in hand. I vacillated between raising my fist to knock and reaching for the latch to let myself in. Had Hunter returned yet? If so, did he expect me to let myself in, or to maintain appropriate formalities and knock? I knew he needed to keep Miriam's presence a secret and my knocking could potentially be heard by someone.

I huffed in annoyance at my own nervousness. Hunter had referred to this plan as subterfuge, so he couldn't be too angry if I left formality by the wayside. I reached for the latch, but the door opened before I touched it.

I jumped, struggling to keep the broth from spilling as I recovered from the fright of having Hunter suddenly appear in the doorway. He wrapped his hand around my wrist, trying to steady the bowl.

"My apologies."

I tried my best to smile my forgiveness.

He took the bowl from my hands. "Come in." He stepped back.

I dipped my head, keenly aware of the fact I was being invited into a room where I should not be allowed. I felt like an intruder.

There was a basin of water and some rags sitting on a chair that was pulled up beside the bed. Miriam lay in the bed, her eyes blinking slowly open and closed, on the verge of sleep. Hunter closed the door and I held out the nightgown.

He took it, nodding in thanks then looking over to Miriam. His eyes darted from her to the nightdress and back again before he started rubbing the back of his head.

Right. I reached to take the garment back. "You go." I nodded toward the door.

He released a breath, relief rolling off of him. "Thank you." He gestured toward Miriam. "For more than just...for everything." He shoved a hand into his hair and pulled. "I'm glad you're the one who found her."

"Me too." I twisted the nightdress around one hand. "Her knock was quiet."

"That's what scares me." His eyes took on a haunted look and I knew what he was thinking. It was the same horror that had run through my own head. What if I hadn't been in the kitchen? Would we have found Miriam's body by the door in the morning, after it was too late?

He stared at Miriam, traumatic what-ifs no doubt running through his head. When he finally looked back at me, I tried to give him a reassuring smile then nodded toward the door.

One corner of his mouth lifted the faintest bit and he let himself out.

Miriam was awake, if only just, but I was able to get her out of her apron dress and chemise and throw the dry nightdress over her head.

She fell back onto the pillow with a sigh. I tugged the dress down to cover her legs then pulled the blankets back in place. "Don't sleep. You must eat."

She nodded and I went to open the door. Hunter looked up from his pacing and hurried over. He stepped in and I stepped out. "Be sure she eats," I said as we passed each other. It was uncomfortable, me giving him orders, but I didn't want him to think that letting her sleep would be better.

He looked at me, his gaze heavy in the silent moments that passed. "Thank you" was all that he said, but it felt like more than just words.

I nodded in acceptance and he surprised me by taking my hand and bowing over it. The action left me frozen in surprise, but he went immediately to pick up the bowl and didn't notice how much his gesture had affected me. I closed the door behind me, my feet moving slowly over the stone floor as I made my way back to the kitchen to bank the fire once again before climbing the stairs to my room. I worried for Miriam and her health. I worried for Hunter and the responsibility that now lay on his shoulders. And I worried for both of them should they be discovered...

You can find *Cloaked in Scarlet* on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09TQ7VR6X/>

To My Readers

Thank you for reading! Writing fairytale retellings is new for me, and I'll be honest, I wasn't sure I was going to like it at first. But I have so enjoyed building this world and these characters. It was so much fun to go back to my writing roots and re-enter my Dalthia world, but from a slightly different entry point.

Since I'm an indie author, your support and feedback makes all the difference in the success of my books. Please take just a minute to leave a review (a sentence or two is great) for other potential readers on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere else. Word of mouth is essential for me to get the word out, so if you enjoyed reading *Hooked*, tell a friend!

For notifications on when a new release is available, please follow my Amazon author profile: <https://www.amazon.com/Annette-K-Larsen/e/B00ENMN85K>

If you would like to receive updates and have access to bonus material like deleted scenes or scenes from my heroes' points of view, please go to my website and sign up for my newsletter (<http://www.annetteklarsen.com/extras/>).

You can also follow me on Twitter (@AnnetteKLarsen), Instagram (@AnnetteKLarsen), or Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/authoraklarsen>.

Happy reading!

Annette K. Larsen

Acknowledgements

This book did not come together smoothly. It started out as a 25,000 word adaptation of Sleeping Beauty. It was terrible. But it was a starting point. I had written most of it over a four-day writing retreat in the hopes that starting with a rushed, trashy draft would at least get the ball rolling. And while, yes, it did, it also created a lot of built-in problems, especially when I decided that Sleeping Beauty would NOT work. I had to take it apart, delete a bunch of scenes, redefine characters, etc...

I was doing my very best to work more swiftly than I usually do, and because of that, the story didn't just happen. I usually let my characters lead and tell me where they want to go, but that necessitates taking time. In the end, it did come together and I love the way that it turned out (hopefully you do too), but that was only by the grace of my editor, Jana Miller, and some brutally honest beta readers. Thank you Leiana, Shauna and Anna. You all make my work so much better!

Also by Annette K. Larsen

Books of Dalthia series:

Just Ella
Missing Lily
Saving Marilee
Painting Rain
Keeping Kinley

Tales Of Winberg series:

Hooked
Cloaked in Scarlet
The Swindler's Daughter

Contemporary:

If I Could Stay
All Our Broken Pieces
All That Stands Between Us
Songs for Libby

Each book in both the Winberg series and the Dalthia series focuses on a different character. There are no cliffhangers.

You can find all my books here:

<https://amzn.to/3HLtR8C>

About the Author

I was born in Utah, but I migrated to Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia before settling in Idaho.

I love words. I always have. And though I dabbled in writing throughout school, becoming an author was never a goal of mine because I never imagined it would be possible. It took me seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a whole lot of trial and error. Not the most time-effective method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me.

I write clean romance because I love it. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving in ever can.

I love chocolate, *Into the Woods*, ocean waves, my husband, and my five littles. And I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment.